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Linda H. Peterson: Becoming a Woman of Letters

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INTRODUCTION

It has become common to refer to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers as “professional” in their literary lives—whether Aphra Behn supporting herself solely by her pen, Fanny Burney identifying with the professional Streatham circle rather than the more amateur Bluestockings, Jane Austen negotiating the publication terms of her novels with John Murray, or Charlotte Brontë buying *The Author’s Printing and Publishing Assistant* (1839) to inform herself on matters of paper, typeface, and layout before publishing the *Poems* (1847) of Acton, Curren, and Ellis Bell.¹ These women were professional in a modern sense: they show an interest in making money, dealing with publishers in a business-like way, actively pursuing a literary career, and achieving both profit and popularity in the literary marketplace. Yet whether authorship was or, indeed, should be considered a profession—equal to that of law or medicine, the military or the clergy—was a hotly debated question in the nineteenth century. In the early decades, the profession of authorship, for both men and women writers, was neither assumed nor assured. Looking back in 1888 on the previous fifty years, Walter Besant may have declared, in celebration of the progress of the profession of letters, “There has been a great upward movement of the professional class,”² but his was a retrospective glance.

For one thing, early in the century it was not clear that financial remuneration for literary work was substantial or stable enough to warrant the claim that authorship qualified as a “profession.” As Lee Erickson has argued in *The Economy of Literary Form*, only with the rise of periodicals in the 1820s and 1830s could authors count on substantial fees for their literary work: 20, 30, and even 40 guineas per sheet (a guinea being a professional fee of a pound plus a shilling, a sheet equaling 16 pages), with payments of £100 or more per article to famous authors and annual salaries of £500, £600, or more for editors. With these payments, “young men seeking their fortune in



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London and Edinburgh soon could afford to become professional journalists and could make enough money to live as gentlemen³—and this financial basis propelled the development of authorship as a profession. Yet being able to “live as gentlemen” (or gentlewomen) did not assure the *status* of a middle-class professional: beyond economics lay linguistic, social, and intellectual distinctions.

Nineteenth-century linguistic usage distinguished between a profession and a trade, the former “a vocation in which a professed knowledge of some department of learning or science” is applied “to the affairs of others,” the latter a business that manufactures or sells some object or commodity.⁴ Many nineteenth-century writers, men and women alike, feared the taint of trade because they sold manuscripts to publishers and thus, perhaps, dealt in commodities: books, pamphlets, articles. Most handled this nicety of usage by referring to authorship as a “profession” and to publishing or bookselling as “the trade.”⁵ During the campaign for a reformed copyright act in the 1830s and 1840s, as Catherine Seville has shown, authors instigated a parallel distinction between the “work” and the “book”—the work itself being the subject of copyright, the book in which it was contained being the “commodity” that the printer produced and the publisher sold.⁶ But the ambiguity of literary work—whether authors were offering knowledge to their readership or selling commodities to publishers—often gave authors pause. Their insistent distinction between the “profession” and the “trade” had less to do with money per se (for publishers were often fabulously wealthy, while authors earned little more than modest middle-class incomes) than with a conception of the author as, in Wordsworth’s phrase, “a man speaking to men.”⁷ Among themselves, writers made further distinctions by separating “authors” from “hacks,” the former writing out of superior knowledge, native genius, or achieved literary talent, the latter merely producing copy for the press. In “The Hero as Man of Letters,” Carlyle went even further when, quoting Fichte, he labeled the false literary man a “Bungler, *Stümper*.”⁸ As the *OED* more soberly notes, a professional designates someone “engaged in one of the learned or skilled professions, or in a calling considered socially superior to a trade or handicraft.”⁹

Underlying such distinctions was an uncertainty about whether authors might legitimately claim membership in a “profession of letters.” This phrase, which increasingly came into use as authors gained confidence in their chosen work and found they could earn sufficient income to maintain a middle-class life, typically cited as £300 per year, implied a social achievement that was debatable even at mid-century. Male writers we today would call “professional,” without giving the label a second thought, came down on both sides of the question—with G. H. Lewes asserting in *Fraser’s Magazine* (1847) that “literature has become a profession,” offering “a means of subsistence almost as certain as the bar or the church,” and William Jerdan, for many years editor of the *Literary Gazette* and a man who had garnered an income well in

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excess of Lewes's requisite £300 per annum, countering in his *Autobiography* (1852–53) that such was not the case.¹⁰ For Jerdan, literature lacked the structure of rewards, prizes, and public recognition that marked the learned professions—an insight anticipating criteria that modern sociologists use to distinguish professions from other working groups: the existence of entrance requirements, an organization to represent members' interests and set standards for their work, a hierarchy or developmental sequence that includes awards and prizes for high achievement, an economic monopoly in the field, and the ability of members to set their own fees.¹¹

In considering these questions, authors debated whether writing should be pursued in the leisure hours after fulfilling the obligations of a traditional, learned profession (or, in the case of women, domestic duties) or whether it should be a full-time occupation. The phrase “man of letters” looks back to an earlier era when a gentleman could pursue his study, reading, and writing in leisure hours. In the eighteenth century and at the start of the nineteenth, a man of letters was simply a scholar, a man of learning—as Walter Scott suggested when he called Lord Minto “a man of letters, a poet and a native of Teviotdale.”¹² For Scott, the designation “man of letters” was distinct from that of “professional author.” Indeed, it was Scott who determined to rely on his legal training for his livelihood and quipped that literature should be a staff and not a crutch.¹³ Not until late in the nineteenth century, with the instigation in 1878 of John Morley's series, *English Men of Letters*, did the phrase become nearly synonymous with the concept of a professional author (what we now call a “public intellectual”) and widely used as an honorific for a writer who had achieved literary distinction as well as financial success. Even Morley wondered, in his *Recollections* (1917), whether literary pursuits might be better achieved “in two hours after a busy day” rather than by working full-time as a writer.¹⁴

Professional women of letters emerged, as a group, simultaneously with their male counterparts during the nineteenth century. Although Norma Clarke has argued, in *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters*, that the woman of letters is an eighteenth-century phenomenon, made possible by the firm status of patrician culture and the formation of elite social circles like the Bluestockings, she is in fact aligning the woman of letters with an older usage: the humanist sense of “letters” as polite “literature and scholarship.”¹⁵ The “fall” in Clarke's title reflects her view that, by the nineteenth century, with “improved educational facilities, a vastly expanded commercial press, and the reading and buying public that sustained it,” the older, patrician culture of letters had declined and the status of women writers fell with it.¹⁶ This book challenges the historical arc of “rise and fall.” I argue that the “vastly expanded commercial press” made possible the modern man and woman of letters, and trace the ongoing, if not always smooth, development of women's professional authorship during the nineteenth century. I explore the question of status not only in terms of women as a group but as a

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recurring concern that all authors, male and female alike, faced in the Victorian literary field and that women authors negotiated individually—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. In emphasizing the differences among literary careers, my project extends the work of Betty A. Schellenberg in *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, who argues that women constructed their authorial identities self-consciously and diversely, from Sarah Scott's steadfast refusal to acknowledge a literary career, to Sarah Fielding's "republic of letters" model of authorship, to Charlotte Lennox's wholly professional approach, "more prescient of the future of authorship."¹⁷ That "future of authorship," the flowering of literary professionalism, lay in the nineteenth century with the burgeoning of print culture and the opening of new genres for women writers: the essay, the literary review, the periodical column, the biographical portrait and historical sketch, the travelogue, and the serialized tale.¹⁸ Women writers were no longer confined to fiction and drama, the authors (and subjects) of "nobody's story," as Catherine Gallagher has titled her study of eighteenth-century women in the literary marketplace.¹⁹ With these new periodical genres emerged the modern woman of letters and her new self-constructions.

The phrase "woman of letters" is, tellingly, a Victorian invention. It first appears on the title page of Julia Kavanagh's *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches* (1863), a work that creates a genealogy for Victorian women authors by tracing an eighteenth-century heritage in Aphra Behn, Sarah Fielding, Fanny Burney, Charlotte Smith, Ann Radcliff, Jane Austen, Amelia Opie, and Lady Morgan—that is, by referring to the writers we highlight today in the history of women's literary professionalism.²⁰ But the phrase "woman of letters" does not surface regularly in book or periodical writing until the 1880s when James Payn, a journalist, essayist, and editor for the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Cornhill Magazine*, uses it offhandedly in a humorous sketch titled "Fraudulent Guests" (1883). Payn refers to seeking "an introduction to a well-known woman of letters in London" as a "very young man," and being told by a mutual friend, "she will have nothing to do with you. She says she knows a great deal too many people already."²¹ Payn's reference to his youth dates this incident to the 1850s (born in 1830, he was contributing to *Household Words* by the mid-1850s and editing *Chamber's Journal* by 1859), so perhaps the phrase was in play as early as the 1850s. It appears regularly, however, only after Morley initiated the *Men of Letters* series in the late 1870s. No doubt, the honorific concept of a "woman of letters" was present when Morley commissioned Margaret Oliphant early in the 1880s to write a volume on Richard Sheridan (on the principle that it takes one to know one).²² The woman of letters was fully established when George Meredith designated Alice Meynell as a great "Englishwoman of letters" in an 1896 article in the *National Review* and when the *Men of Letters* series added volumes on George Eliot, Fanny Burney, and Maria Edgeworth

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after the turn of the century.²³ But whether or not in common usage, as this book argues, women of letters flourished throughout the century, as women increasingly conceived of their literary careers and constructed their public personae in a professional mode.²⁴

The debates of nineteenth-century authors over the status of the literary life they had chosen reveal the terms, trials, and (sometimes) triumphs of authorship as a profession. Women figured significantly in these debates—occasionally (alas, all too predictably) as amateur counterparts against which male authors defined their professional careers, more often as participants in public discourses aiding the cause of professionalization, always as collaborators in an emerging field of artistic and cultural endeavor. It has been common, following in the wake of Mary Poovey's "The Man-of-Letters as Hero: *David Copperfield* and the Professional Writer," to assume that women in the domestic sphere provided a "stabilizing and mobilizing" function in legitimating the professional male author.²⁵ While this may be an accurate account of Dickens's strategy, it represents only one perspective on the professionalization of authorship, one moment in a process that unfurled during the long nineteenth century. A full history of authorship in Victorian England, one that takes into account women writers and their work, has yet to be written.²⁶ As a contribution to this much-needed history, chapter 1 examines the discourses of professional authorship—whether authorship was or was not a profession, what aspects of literary work made it a profession, what lacks or drawbacks authors needed to remedy—at three pivotal moments: at its emergence in the 1830s, a decade associated with the rise of periodicals and adequate payment for writers' work; at mid-century, when the claims for professional status were forcefully articulated in the drive for copyright and when men and women authors sought to define their contributions to the nation; and in the 1880s and 1890s, when Walter Besant (re)asserted in the *Author*, the journal he edited for the newly established Society of Authors, and in his guidebook for aspiring writers, *The Pen and the Book*, the claim that Lewes had made fifty years earlier: "that a respectable man [or woman] of letters may command an income and a position quite equal to those of the average lawyer or doctor."²⁷ In this historical survey, my emphasis falls on periodicals, for that is where the debates about authorship were aired, where the discourses evolved, and where writers established their literary reputations. It was in periodicals that the modern conception of the man and woman of letters emerged: the writer whose critical thinking about culture and society rose above the commonplace and offered what Coventry Patmore (in a review of Alice Meynell's essays) called "classical" achievement, writing that embodied "new thought of general and permanent significance in perfect language, and bearing, in every sentence, the hall-mark of genius."²⁸

The multifaceted question of how Victorian women entered the profession of letters—how they articulated their role as authors, negotiated the

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material conditions of authorship, and constructed myths of the woman author, often against the material realities—is pursued in the six case studies of this book. I focus on issues that women writers considered privately and debated publicly with their female contemporaries: whether they should adopt masculine patterns of work or formulate feminine (or feminist) models of maternal, familial, or collaborative literary production; whether they should participate in debates over copyright, royalties, and other material aspects of authorship or restrict their public statements to intellectual and imaginative concerns that reflected a more high-minded, idealistic view of literary labor; and how they might achieve economic success without sacrificing the equally important need for critical esteem and lasting literary status. In the nineteenth-century literary field, the final cluster—economic success, critical esteem, and lasting reputation—determined whether a woman writer might be designated a “woman of letters.” The myths of authorship she presented publicly and her savvy negotiations in the literary market were essential to winning that honorific designation.

For the case studies, I have chosen six women of letters whose careers reveal new possibilities for the professional woman author and whose commentaries on their literary lives reveal the obstacles they faced and the strategies by which they succeeded (partially, if not wholly). All professionally innovative, these women took different approaches to authorship—approaches determined in part by their historical moment, in part thrust upon them by the demands of the marketplace, in part adopted as expressions of highly personal values and contingencies. The case studies do not, as one of my readers noted, “round up the usual suspects” (though canonical figures appear frequently in this book); rather, I have focused on women whose literary innovations and public self-constructions are pivotal in the history of authorship. I alternate women whose lives were marked by professional success and literary esteem with lesser-known writers, famous in their day, uncanonical now, but nonetheless representative of important models of nineteenth-century authorship. It might be tempting to divide these women into “winners” and “losers,” but I wish to resist the “great woman” approach to literary history (except when the writer herself invokes it). The case studies are arranged in pairs to suggest the different choices made by women authors of roughly the same generation and to explore the effects of their choices in the formation of literary careers, their own and those of their successors.

I begin with Harriet Martineau, the most prominent woman of letters of the 1830s, perhaps of the century. Martineau viewed herself as a “professional son” and “citizen of the world,” entering the literary field with the same career aspirations and work practices as her male counterparts. In her *Autobiography* and letters, Martineau presents herself as a “solitary young authoress” with “no pioneer in her literary path,” and constructs her life story along the lines of the heroic man of letters popularized by Thomas Carlyle in

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On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (1841). Yet, paradoxically, Martineau began her career in a recognizably feminine mode: writing devotional literature, producing tales for a publisher of didactic tracts, and contributing essays on religious and moral subjects to the Unitarian *Monthly Repository*. Martineau's (re)invention of her career as public commentator on the great political and social issues of her day, from these apparently feminine origins, is the focus of chapter 2, as I analyze the means and motives for this transformation from her early career in the 1820s to the publication of her wildly successful *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–34), which made her name and fame as a woman of letters and established a model adopted by many subsequent women of letters, most notably George Eliot, Frances Power Cobbe, and Eliza Lynn Linton.

In contrast, Mary Howitt, another seminal figure of the 1830s, embraced a model of literary production as an extension of a woman's domestic duties and social responsibilities. Howitt collaborated with family members—her husband, William, her sisters, Anna and Emma, and her daughter Anna Mary—in a distinctive early Victorian form of a “family business,” treating her work as part of a domestic economy and advocating communal labor and achievement. Yet Howitt often registers a tension between domestic collaboration and individual aspiration. Chapter 3 explores that tension, arguing that she was in fact most successful (financially, aesthetically, and professionally) when working in a collaborative mode. Howitt transmitted her ideology of collaborative work to the first generation of British feminists, the writers, painters, and social reformers of the Langham Place Group who envisioned an artistic “sisterhood,” adapted her ideology of work, and argued for the superior achievement of collaborative artistic production. I trace Howitt's legacy in the work of Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Rayner Parkes, and especially her daughter Anna Mary Howitt, whose *Sisters in Art* (1852) articulates and transforms her mother's collaborative poetics.

At mid-century many women writers embraced the “parallel streams” model that Elizabeth Gaskell promulgated in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), one that separated the woman from the author, the private, domestic self from the public persona and literary creator. One motive in writing the *Life* was to preserve the category of artistic genius for women's authorship, even while demonstrating that literary women could fulfill (and would not abandon) the duties of domestic life. Later women authors found this model powerful and enabling in that *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* locates the origin of literary genius in an ordinary parsonage in an isolated Yorkshire village; shows its subject as an avid reader and scribbling adolescent who, with her sisters, writes romantic tales and secretly publishes a book of poems, even as she labors as a schoolteacher; and traces a meteoric rise to fame with a pseudonymous novel, *Jane Eyre*, and its successors, *Shirley* and *Villette*. This myth of the woman author was far more appealing than the story of a long literary apprenticeship told in Martineau's *Autobiography* (1877) or of hard

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study, editorial drudgery, and a late novelistic career mapped by John Cross in *George Eliot's Life* (1885). Yet it also proved untenable after mid-century. As Charlotte Riddell demonstrates in her *kunstlerroman* *A Struggle for Fame* (1883), the Brontëan model was useful for expressing the high aspirations of women authors and countering the common perception that men's literary efforts superseded theirs. But as Riddell's life and work also show, in the commercialized literary market of the 1860s and 1870s, with an ever-increasing split between popular fiction and high art and with the increasing pressure of literary celebrity, the "parallel streams" model proved ineffective for achieving distinction—not to mention impossible to enact. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss this debate over *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and its myths of female authorship.

Finally, chapters 6 and 7, on Alice Meynell and Mary Cholmondeley, suggest various models of authorship available to the fin-de-siècle woman of letters—some inherited from female predecessors, others suggested by male authors' careers, still others constructed to address specific literary, cultural, and material contexts of the 1880s and 1890s. In large part because of the volatility of the periodical and book market, none could fully assure lasting distinction as a woman of letters. Meynell represents a remarkable case of critical esteem leading to financial reward and secure reputation, whereas Cholmondeley reveals a case of critical success failing to sustain a career. Meynell began as a nature poet and Sapphic poetess, but recognized the limitations of these poetic modes in fin-de-siècle literary culture. Forced by financial necessity to undertake periodical journalism, she served a decade-long apprenticeship in which she mastered the forms of art and book reviewing, critical biography, and the belletristic essay. Chapter 6 analyzes the contexts in which, paradoxically and quite contrarily to common accounts of the nineteenth-century literary field, the essay replaced the poem as the prestigious genre, and Meynell's serial publication, in regular columns written for the *Scots Observer* and *Pall Mall Gazette*, became a means of achieving literary "distinction." De facto, periodical writing led to Meynell's *succès d'estime*. The literary field of the 1890s in which she worked did not operate by the conventional rules—in part because of its new fascination with the essay, in part because of an appetite for small, aesthetically pleasing books, in part because of the opening of the American periodical market—and Meynell's career reveals her careful negotiation of its various demands.

Cholmondeley, in contrast, was unable to achieve lasting distinction as a woman of letters. Her early career reveals a disjunction between aspiration and achievement, between her popular success as a sensational novelist and her desire for critical esteem. Yet, for a moment in the late 1890s, Cholmondeley was able to join popular success with artistic achievement and critical acclaim in *Red Pottage* (1899), her New Woman novel and *kunstlerroman*. In creating Hester Gresley, a "woman of genius" with no trace of the Grub Street hack, Cholmondeley protests against her devaluation in the

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market after the collapse of the triple-decker novel and reinvents herself as an “advanced” writer in an emerging modern(ist) field of elite art—to great critical acclaim. The loss of regular outlets for her work in fin-de-siècle periodicals and book publishing made it difficult for Cholmondeley to capitalize on her success, as her surviving letters reveal. In this chapter I underscore the new publishing trends and market pressures that made it difficult for late Victorian women of letters to sustain their careers—and that were so different from the conditions that had sustained the work and reputations of their early and mid-Victorian counterparts.

Some readers may miss, in this preview of chapters, the names of notable nineteenth-century women of letters—George Eliot and Margaret Oliphant, Anna Jameson and Vernon Lee, Caroline Norton and Francis Power Cobbe, to cite half a dozen. This is one consequence of a case study approach and a decision to focus on women authors who forged new career patterns at pivotal moments in the history of authorship. But many of these women of letters do in fact appear—whether as collaborators with, inheritors of, or commentators on the authorial innovations of the featured subjects. Anna Jameson, for instance, collaborated with Martineau and Howitt on women’s legal rights and contributed a major statement on women’s work that influenced Howitt and her circle. George Eliot (then Mary Anne Evans) followed a professional model that Martineau had forged a generation prior, moving from provincial beginnings to periodical apprenticeship to a full-fledged London literary career; indeed, Eliot, who worked as subeditor on the *Westminster Review* when Martineau was a frequent contributor, acknowledged her predecessor as “a trump—the only Englishwoman that possesses thoroughly the art of writing.”²⁹ Oliphant, Eliot’s contemporary, adopted the “family business” model of Mary Howitt, moving to London in the 1840s with her new husband, a painter and stained-glass artist, and entering literary circles that included the Howitts, the Halls, and other dual-career couples. An astute observer of the London literary scene and principle reviewer for *Blackwood’s Magazine* for nearly fifty years, Oliphant provides important contemporary analyses of women’s professional literary careers—as do others like Jameson, Norton, and Parkes, whose contributions figure more briefly in this study.

I have titled this book *Becoming a Woman of Letters* with at least two senses of *becoming* in mind: the entries of individual women into authorship as revealed in the beginning moments of their literary careers, and the development of the woman of letters as a conceptual category during the nineteenth century. Perhaps the present participle suggests a third meaning: the state of always being in process, of always seeking yet never quite achieving secure professional status—a predicament that faces men and women of letters even today.

I have subtitled the book “Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market” to suggest a distinction between the models of authorship

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that writers project in their prose, poetry, or fiction and the material conditions in which women writers produced their work. By “myths,” I mean the accounts that “embody and provide an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something” (*OED*)—in this instance, for authorship. In using this term, I do not mean to deflate the self-constructions that Victorian authors, both men and women, articulated for themselves and their reading public. If, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, the literary field is “a site of struggles,”³⁰ its boundaries in particular revealing the terms of the disputes, then authorial self-constructions—models and myths of the author—are as important for understanding the struggles as are the market pressures and possibilities in which they worked.

As this study will reveal, I believe that nineteenth-century women’s myths were more enabling than disabling, and that they allowed women writers to claim new territories of endeavor and high achievement for their work. My approach is thus more varied in emphasis than earlier studies of nineteenth-century women’s authorship, which tend to stress the limitations and lack of opportunities that women faced or the social norms they transgressed in the act of publishing. Dorothy Mermin’s seminal study, *Godiva’s Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830–1880*, emphasizes such transgression, especially the sense of exposure that women writers felt in producing socially useful literature.³¹ Yet Lady Godiva was only one of many myths that nineteenth-century women of letters invoked, and not the dominant one. Even in a more balanced account, Mary Poovey’s *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, the emphasis falls on the dual consciousness of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women who published: “nearly every woman who wrote was able to internalize a self-conception at least temporarily at odds with the norm, . . . and the legacy of this period is a repertoire of the strategies that enabled women either to conceive of themselves in two apparently incompatible ways or to express themselves in a code capable of being read in two ways.”³² It may be that a dual consciousness continued to inform some early Victorian conceptions of the woman author, as in the “parallel streams” model of Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* or in Martineau’s comment that it was the loss of family fortune and “gentility” that freed her from writing privately and gave her the “liberty to do my own work in my own way.”³³ But it is also the case that many women writers—from Mary Howitt in the 1820s to Alice Meynell in the 1870s—suffered from no apparent psychological duality as they embarked on literary careers. Indeed, the archives on which I draw show these women to be astute participants in what Robert Darnton has called the “communications circuit.”³⁴

As social norms for women changed during the nineteenth century, so too did attitudes toward women’s writing, yielding a greater range of possibilities in the profession of letters. Recent biographies of individual women of letters—Elisabeth Jay’s *Margaret Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* (1995), Rosemary Ashton’s *George Eliot: A Life* (1996), Judith Johnston’s *Anna*

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Jameson: Victorian, Feminist, Woman of Letters (1997), Vineta Colby's *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (2003), Sally Mitchell's *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer* (2004), and Linda K. Hughes's *Graham R.: Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters* (2005), among others—suggest a steady progress in the professionalization of literary women and a diminishment, if not complete disappearance, of the duality that Poovey and other scholars note for the early decades of the century. By the end of the nineteenth century, a duality—if, indeed, it is legitimate to reduce complexities to binaries—splits not the “proper lady” from the “woman writer” (a socially gendered distinction) but the popular writer from the high-art woman of letters (economic and aesthetic distinctions). But whatever the historically based conceptions of women's authorship might be, it is the interaction of the myths (the articulated desires about what it means to be an author) and the material conditions (the complexities of the marketplace in which authors must labor) that interests me and gives focus to this book.