

The Lady Critic: Women of Letters and Critical Authority in British Periodicals, 1854-1908

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## **Abstract**

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This study considers how and why the established histories of criticism fail to recognize the Victorian woman critic. Although many women wrote critical essays for Victorian periodicals, the practice of anonymous publication and the gendered coding of certain genres ensured that the image of the critic was masculine for Victorian readers. And despite the ongoing work of *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, the growing field of periodicals research, and forty years of feminist scholarship, the Victorian critic remains, by and large, a male figure for us as well. In order to understand how women critics justified their authority and negotiated the gendered assumptions of critical discourse over the second half of the nineteenth century, this project explores the rhetorical strategies used by four prolific women journalists: Margaret Oliphant, Anne Mozley, Julia Wedgwood, and Anne Thackeray Ritchie. These case studies demonstrate how women critics defined their role in response to an expanding reading public, conservative gender ideology, the professionalization of criticism, changing aesthetics, and the establishment of English as a university discipline. They also reveal that both anonymous and signed women critics addressed these contentious issues to subtly undermine prejudices about gender and genre. In addition to demonstrating the feminist agenda of these (sometimes conservative) critics, this study also seeks to complicate the image of the moralizing woman critic symbolized by “Mrs. Grundy.” Moral rhetoric was common among both male and female critics in the nineteenth

century, and this project argues that moral considerations are not necessarily antithetical to artistic ones in nineteenth-century discourse. We must begin to view women's critical arguments in their full context of political, aesthetic, and professional concerns if we truly wish to understand what was at stake for Victorian critics and readers. Thus, by presenting a fuller portrait of these individual women authors, this study not only critiques the gendered definitions of genre that continue to shape literary history, but also revises our understanding of Victorian critical theories.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Looking for the Lady Critic

A variety of explanations have been offered for the rise of the critic in the nineteenth century and the founding of modern literary criticism. Scholars have argued that the critic's importance increased along with the growth of the reading public and available reading matter, that as religious faith waned literary culture assumed its functions and rituals, that society's broad embrace of professionalism replaced the man of letters with the professional critic, and that the institutionalization of English literature as a university subject established an elite group of "experts" with a clearly defined set of standards and qualifications.<sup>1</sup> These narratives reveal some of the multiple and overlapping social factors that shaped the field of criticism and the role of the critic, but none of them accounts for the significance of women critics. I do not refer simply to the fact that these arguments favor exclusive terms like "men of letters" or that they tend to focus on a small group of male writers, though it is clear enough why this has so often been the case.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when we try to discuss any of the established histories of criticism using a woman critic as our example, things get rather complicated.

Even the best account we have for the rise of the reviewer ignores some of the complexities of the reviewer's gender. Richard Altick has demonstrated that increased literacy

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1. See Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969); Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (1953); Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (1982); Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (1983); Small, *Conditions for Criticism* (1991).

2. The usual suspects include Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Henry James, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde, with George Eliot serving as the lone female representative.

along with advances in printing technology, cheap paper, and the repeal of the “taxes on knowledge” led to an explosion of cheap reading material at mid-century. The expansion of both the reading public and printed matter meant that the periodical reviewer enjoyed a greater scope and more paid work than ever before as readers looked for help in sifting through the “flood” of new novels on the market. Women writers at this time also found increasing opportunities to earn a living in journalism. In practical terms, reviewing was an ideal occupation for literate women. According to Victorian gender ideology, a woman’s work belonged in the private sphere, but the woman writer could negotiate this dilemma because writing could be done in her “spare time” after managing her household. Furthermore, the convention of anonymous publishing—routine until the later part of the century—allowed women journalists to publish without the stigma of placing their names in the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> But while the growth of the reading public gave reviewers their *raison d’être*, it also spawned a nasty discourse about uncritical readers, particularly women. Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* demonstrates that women’s reading was considered dangerous unless closely supervised. If, as contemporary gender stereotypes had it, woman’s naturally “susceptible” nature compromised her reading and her ability to judge, it would certainly undermine her critical authority. So the woman reviewer found herself in an ideologically untenable position:

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3. As Barbara Onslow has pointed out, magazine editors found many advantages in giving journalistic work to women, not least of which was their relative availability. Male journalists might hold other positions and write on the side, but writing was often the only source of income a middle-class woman could hope for. Always ready to take an assignment, often dependent upon the money to support the family income, and unfortunately, often resigned to earning less than their male counterparts, women journalists were a useful labor pool for most magazines and newspapers.

in theory, she was too sensitive to read critically; in fact, she was responsible for guiding the choices of vast numbers of English readers.

The irony of this position could not have been lost on the many female reviewers writing anonymously for periodicals. Margaret Oliphant served as house reviewer for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from 1854 to 1897 and contributed approximately 245 non-fiction articles.<sup>4</sup> At the magazine's peak in 1860, Oliphant's readership might have been as large as 10,000.<sup>5</sup> Geraldine Jewsbury, who reviewed approximately 2,000 books for the *Athenaeum* from 1849 until her death in 1880, could have influenced an estimated 15,000-20,000 readers.<sup>6</sup> Writing for the *Cornhill* in its early years, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold addressed the same audience of anywhere from 80,000 readers in 1860 down to 30,000 in 1865.<sup>7</sup> It is puzzling to consider how the popular image of the "susceptible" woman reader withstood the reality of so many professional women readers. But despite the work of so many women reviewers, critics, and literary essayists, the critic was a man in the Victorian imagination. And despite the ongoing work of *The Wellesley Index to*

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4. I do not attempt to separate literary criticism from history, biography, or any other genre subsumed under "non-fiction" because genre instability in the nineteenth century as well as the present makes this difficult and unproductive. As I will argue, widening our understanding of "criticism" is a key step in recognizing women's critical writing.

5. Ellegård, "The Readership of the Periodical Press in Mid-Victorian Britain," 17-18. Ellegård notes that "The *Printers' Register*, (1868), put the circulation at 7,500: it was probably greater in 1860, before the keen competition from the cheaper magazines had started."

6. *Ibid.*, 9. Ellegård puts the estimated circulation at 20,000 for 1855 and 15,000 for 1860-1870.

7. *Ibid.*, 18.

*Victorian Periodicals*, the growing field of periodicals research, and forty years of feminist scholarship, the Victorian critic remains, by and large, a male figure for us as well.

Since its first volume was published in 1966, the *Wellesley Index* has performed the invaluable function of identifying the majority of anonymous contributors to forty-five of the major Victorian periodicals. By 1979, Walter Houghton and his staff of editors had identified 10,300 contributors, 14% of whom were women. As Janice H. Harris has noted, “Given that the originators of the *Wellesley Index* chose not to index specifically ‘ladies’ publications or poetry, that 14 percent figure is surprisingly high.”<sup>8</sup> And yet, Marysa Demoor rightly asserts that the *Wellesley Index* “has so far failed to change the current assumptions about the gender of the typical Victorian reviewer.”<sup>9</sup> In *Their Fair Share: Women, Power and Criticism in the Athenaeum* (2000), Demoor seems to suggest that we must look to other papers for women’s critical work, and her success with the *Athenaeum* bears out the point. Similarly, Molly Youngkin’s work on the *Women’s Penny Paper*, the *Woman’s Herald*, the *Woman’s Signal*, and *Shafts* reveals networks of literary criticism by women for women at the *fin de siècle*. These studies and others highlight the wealth of undiscovered criticism in periodicals not indexed by the *Wellesley*.<sup>10</sup> But while I agree that the *Wellesley Index* hasn’t changed our perception of

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8. Harris, “Not Suffering and Not Still,” 382.

9. Demoor, *Their Fair Share*, 2-3.

10. Onslow’s *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* also devotes a chapter to reviewers and critics that forcefully demonstrates women’s sizable contributions to a wide range of Victorian periodicals.

the Victorian reviewer's gender, I argue that it is not because women critics aren't in there. We just fail to recognize them.

This study considers why we still do not see the Victorian woman critic. I believe that this continued invisibility is partly the result of nineteenth-century narratives about criticism, and partly our own. We should be well aware by now that *how* we talk about literary criticism determines *who* we talk about. Periodicals studies have shown us that when we begin to think about criticism as a magazine article rather than a leather-bound tome, the range of who counts as a critic suddenly widens. Thus, the usual suspects of former days have moved over to make room for other voices in the wide range of critics, reviewers, and essayists who debated the function of literature and criticism within the pages of Victorian periodicals. But even though we now recognize that the vast body of criticism in the nineteenth century first appeared in weekly, monthly, and quarterly magazines, Victorian and modern ideas about genre still prevent us from adequately accounting for the participation of women critics. Victorian discourse about literature was a gendered affair that identified certain fields of knowledge as appropriate or even natural to a particular sex. That discourse means that we encounter little mention of the woman critic within Victorian social commentary. Furthermore, twentieth- and twenty-first-century research into Victorian criticism has often been stymied by a narrow—and still gendered—view of what counts as criticism. Even the *Wellesley Index*, despite the good work it has done in identifying women writers, is complicit with the gendered discourse that hides women critics from us. Therefore, this project does not aim to recover anyone. Rather, I wish to demonstrate how and why we have overlooked the Victorian women critics who have been right in front of us for some time. Almost all of

the women included here have received scholarly attention in the last decade and can be found in the *Wellesley Index* or one of the newer periodicals databases like *C19*.<sup>11</sup> In short, I have limited my subjects to women critics who are, in Alison Booth's words, hidden "in plain view."<sup>12</sup>

To understand why, despite our best intentions, we still do not see the Victorian woman critic, I examine the narratives that shape our histories. The Victorians told a variety of stories about the role of the critic and criticism. Indeed, "the critic" was an identity still under formation for most of the nineteenth century, and many reviews and critical essays had the added rhetorical function of defining the field they were supposed to already inhabit. Laurel Brake has demonstrated that "Contemporary theorizing on periodical-criticism occurs in the periodicals with a frequency comparable to that on realism and the novel, another important focus of criticism in the nineteenth century," and she argues that this debate is characterized by the "self-consciousness of the Victorian critics and their preoccupations with their own critical practices and discourse."<sup>13</sup> I am particularly interested in the role women played in shaping those practices and how they established their critical authority given the limitations of the prevailing gender ideology and the discourses of professionalism. But I also consider the stories twentieth-century critics have told about Victorian criticism. Sustained attention to sage discourse and the "hero as man of letters," the professional critic, and the role

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11. Alice Zimmern is one exception—she is listed in the *Wellesley*, but not studied as far as I can tell.

12. Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman*, 3.

13. Brake, "Literary Criticism and the Victorian Periodicals," 97.

of critics within the newly established university English departments at the end of the century—while all relevant to the history of criticism—have ensured that the critics we discuss tend to be men. I do not dismiss these narratives, but I complicate them by recognizing the women critics who operated within, parallel to, and against them. The timeframe of this study, which spans from 1855 to the first decade of the twentieth century, is in part dictated by those dominant histories of criticism. This period represents an important shift for literature, its audiences, and women writers especially. The repeal of the last of the taxes on knowledge marks 1855 as a watershed year in publishing history. As I have already noted, the expansion of the reading public and a boom in cheap publications bolstered reviewers' status and gave literate women new opportunities to earn their living. As the century wore on, the policy of anonymity gave way to a new insistence on signature as part of a larger push toward professionalization. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the field of periodicals had become somewhat narrower as many of those titles launched in the 1850s and 1860s folded or combined with others, and the establishment of English as a university discipline gave rise to new questions about the nature and location of critical authority. British men and women journalists used a variety of rhetorical strategies to establish their critical authority during this period of rapidly shifting opportunity. Ultimately, I hope to shed some light on how nineteenth-century narratives and our own narratives about criticism continue to obscure the “lady critic” from Victorian studies.

## Gender and Genre; or, “What Lady Critic?”

I use the term “lady critic” deliberately because we need this term. The Victorian era saw “women readers” and “lady novelists” and even “lady doctors”—all of whom were the target of much anxiety, satire, and debate—but no “lady critic” appears in nineteenth-century discourse to prick the ire of social commentators. This, of course, does not mean that no women wrote criticism. More likely, it means that no one wanted to recognize that women wrote criticism. As Barbara Caine has noted, “no terms emerged to describe women essayists or historians or journalists—and there was no broad recognition of the ‘woman of letters.’”<sup>14</sup> This omission was grounded in a gendered view of literary genres. While the field of “letters” would be associated with male writers, the novel was increasingly identified as a feminine, or feminized, genre. In his 1852 essay, “The Lady Novelists,” George Henry Lewes emphasizes women’s expertise in the details of domestic life and emotions as he argues, “Of all departments of literature, Fiction is the one to which, by nature and by circumstance, women are best adapted.”<sup>15</sup> Many believed that writing about the family and the home came naturally to women, and, according to Elaine Showalter, “Such an approach was particularly attractive because it implied that women’s writing was as artless and effortless as birdsong, and therefore not in competition with the more rational male eloquence.”<sup>16</sup> Lewes’s argument illustrates this

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14. Caine, “Feminism, Journalism and Public Debate,” 99.

15. Lewes, “The Lady Novelists,” 72.

16. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 82.

insistence on masculine rationality, for he allows women a particular space and then strongly differentiates it from men's turf:

...the very nature of fiction calls for that predominance of sentiment which we have already attributed to the feminine mind. ...Hence we may be prepared to find women succeeding better in finesse of detail, in pathos and sentiment, while men generally succeed better in the construction of plots and the delineation of character.<sup>17</sup>

This argument also hints that women were not accorded complete dominance within the novel genre. Lewes was not alone in coding the ability to delineate character as a masculine quality. Indeed, many refused to credit women novelists with the advantage even in depicting female characters. Showalter explains,

The assumption that the most charming heroines and the most profound insights into female psychology came from men was a natural corollary to the Victorian belief that women were partial and defective versions of the full humanity represented by men.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, while "Men could comprehend the emotions of the less-developed creature," it was assumed that "women could never stretch their understanding upward."<sup>19</sup> Women's presumed talents—details and emotions—necessarily meant that they could not achieve the highest praise. Jennifer Phegley notes that

Men were more likely to be designated as realist writers, while...women writers who focused on representing detailed depictions of domestic life were often categorized as practitioners of 'detailism.' The excessive use of detail was cited by many critics as a sign of women's inability to do anything other than copy in minute detail what they saw around them.<sup>20</sup>

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17. Lewes, "The Lady Novelists," 72.

18. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 148.

19. *Ibid.*, 148.

20. Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*, 25.

As Carol Christ puts it, women were praised as translators, but not as original thinkers.<sup>21</sup> This sort of backhanded praise allowed women writers to gain ground in some genres, while implicitly or explicitly barring them from others. In their examination of the professionalization of women's writing, Judith Johnston and Hilary Fraser find that, despite widespread success as novelists, at mid-century women still faced obstacles in entering "masculine" genres like science, history, or philosophy.<sup>22</sup> The distinction between translation and original thought helps explain why women, even while they are considered particularly capable of writing novels, would not be considered adept at judging them. Women's "natural" capacity for writing novels could be seen as a form of translation—little more than molding their emotional and domestic experiences into a story. But to judge a novel, they would have to be able to "stretch their understanding upward"; in other words, they would have to be men.

This explains why so many women writers—both novelists and critics—adopted a male persona. Even before she adopted the pseudonym of George Eliot, Marian Evans used a masculine persona in her work for the *Westminster Review*. Indeed, her 1856 essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," makes it fairly clear why a novelist might also be better off as a man. In this essay, she excoriates the critical practice of praising mediocre fiction by women on the assumption that women can do no better. What Eliot wants is for reviewers to judge fiction on its own merits, regardless of the author's sex. Of course, she had to adopt a male persona to mount this argument. Anne Mozley also dropped hints, through passing reference

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21. Christ, "The Hero as Man of Letters," 25.

22. Johnston and Fraser, "The Professionalization of Women's Writing," 236.

to “school days” or her “boyhood” memories, to suggest a male writer behind her anonymous articles. Her correspondence with Blackwood demonstrates that she depended on keeping not only her name, but also her gender a secret because of the subjects she sometimes wished to treat. In 1866, she proposed an article to *Blackwood’s* regarding the “extreme differences of opinion in the Ch[urch] of Rome.”<sup>23</sup> Upon submitting the article, she reiterates her anonymity,

Of course, you will feel the importance of not allowing the name & sex of the writer to transpire—I mean on your editorial account as well as my own. People dont [sic] generally suspect ladies of writing on such subjects so that if one keeps one’s own counsel there is no danger.<sup>24</sup>

Margaret Oliphant adopted a male persona when she began writing for *Blackwood’s* in the 1850s and then again at the end of her career in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>25</sup> Of course, some of these women used a male persona to broach what we might now call feminist topics. For example, Mozley’s “Clever Women” begins by bemoaning the number of women writers taking up intellectual topics in periodicals, but goes on to consider how few opportunities are open to unmarried women. The condescending male persona seems designed to make the subject more palatable to a conservative audience (as well as a conservative editor).<sup>26</sup> And even

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23. Mozley to John Blackwood, 21 March 1866, Blackwood Papers, MS4725: Folios 11-12, National Library Of Scotland.

24. Mozley to John Blackwood, 12 April 1866, Blackwood Papers, MS4725: Folios 13-14, National Library Of Scotland.

25. See Robinson, “Expanding a ‘Limited Orbit’” for a discussion of Oliphant’s late-career use of male voice.

26. See Wilkes for a similar explanation for Mozley’s conservative persona in *Blackwood’s*.

George Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," which is far more condescending to women writers, ultimately demands that men and women be treated equally by the critics. But that these women critics judged the masculine voice more persuasive tells us a lot about how they saw their audience and how they thought their audience would see them. These examples suggest that women critics recognized that their gender contradicted their position and could undermine their authority.

Many scholars trace the "emphatically masculine" identity of the critic back to Carlyle's 1840 lecture on "The Hero as Man of Letters." In this essay, Carlyle praises writers from varying genres, including Samuel Johnson, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Robert Burns, as "Genuine Men."<sup>27</sup> He argues,

...the Hero as Man of Letters will be found discharging a function for us which is ever honorable, ever the highest; and was once well known to be the highest. He is uttering forth, in such way as he has, the inspired soul of him.... Intrinsically it is the same function which the old generations named a man Prophet, Priest, Divinity for doing; which all manner of Heroes, by speech or by act, are sent into the world to do.<sup>28</sup>

This narrative elevates the status of literature and criticism, but it does not well serve women critics. Carlyle's notion of the critic as a secular priest threatened to exclude women outright, for a priest, secular or otherwise, was by definition a man. When later writers like Matthew Arnold and Leslie Stephen theorized the professional critic, they took their cue from Carlyle and emphasized traits that were opposed to stereotypically feminine capabilities. Arnold's theory of "disinterestedness" and Stephen's notion of the critic as a man apart, "susceptible to a

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27. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 159.

28. *Ibid.*, 139.

force, and yet free from its influence,” both require the critic to control or even turn off his emotional responses.<sup>29</sup> By linking masculinity with the professional writer, Carlyle created an image of the critic that would endure for much of the century and well into twentieth-century literary histories. Indeed, later scholarly works often mimic Carlyle’s praise of “Genuine Men.” John Gross’s *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969) includes only one woman. Patrick Parrinder’s *Authors and Authority* (1977) features chapters on Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, “Reviewers and Bookmen,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Shelley, Hazlitt and Keats, and Matthew Arnold. The subtitle of Harold Orel’s *Victorian Literary Critics* (1984) says it all: George Henry Lewes, Walter Bagehot, Richard Holt Hutton, Leslie Stephen, Andrew Lang, George Saintsbury, and Edmund Gosse. Ian Small’s *Conditions for Criticism* (1991) focuses on Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. In *Public Moralists* (1991), which includes a wide array of social and literary critics, Stefan Collini states explicitly that “Apart from passing mention of exceptional individuals like George Eliot or Mrs Humphry Ward, the cast includes no women, and the use of a male pseudonym by one of these writers and the ‘correct’ married form by the other may hint at some of the reasons for this.”<sup>30</sup> Collini’s justification for his nearly all-male review is surprising, given that the moral approach was one of the few that a woman writer could comfortably occupy in a female persona or even with her signature. Indeed, the prevailing gender ideology positioned women as the moral center of the home and thus the nation. It was through her moral influence on her husband and sons that she could exercise

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29. Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” 18; Stephen, “Charlotte Brontë,” 723.

30. Collini, *Public Moralists*, 3.

legitimate power.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in her popular conduct book, *The Daughters of England* (1843), Sarah Stickney Ellis puts so much stock in woman's duty to exercise her moral influence that she is able to attack women novelists without undermining her own position as a conduct book writer. Similarly, Eliza Lynn Linton adopted the role of moral censor in her attacks on the *New Woman*, and Margaret Oliphant emphasized her moral outrage when she used a feminine persona in her reviews of sensation novels. Nevertheless, studies of Victorian criticism that fixate on the idea of the "secular priest" or "hero as man of letters" almost always neglect women critics.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, scholarly focus on secular priesthood (and the mode of sage writing more generally) has in turn limited our view of Victorian criticism. William R. McKelvy argues that there are two sides of the process of literary sacralization in the nineteenth century, so while some nineteenth-century writers embraced the view that literature could substitute for religion, for many others, "a new understanding of the literary character of Scripture redeems that authority, and in the process literature and the human imagination ascend to sacred heights."<sup>33</sup> In other words, even while some literary critics assumed religious power, many clergymen assumed literary power. McKelvy argues that both narratives were viable for the nineteenth century precisely because they were widely attested in those times. Some might (and many did) remark that literature was

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31. Hannah More offers this argument early in the century in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), and Sarah Stickney Ellis reiterates it in *The Daughters of England*.

32. Thais Morgan's *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power* offers a much needed counterbalance to this trend.

33. McKelvy, *The English Cult of Literature*, 10.

usurping religious power; others might (many did) remark that literature at its best and most powerful performed a religious function or expressed religious ambitions. Perhaps the best thing to say is that both reactions simply describe the same event from different perspectives.<sup>34</sup>

By showing us a counter-discourse to the notion of a secular priesthood, McKelvy's work reminds us that the function of literature and criticism were both up for debate and that there was no consensus during the Victorian era (any more than there is now). But tellingly, his only examples from women's discourse come from novels. One can only surmise that he looked no farther than novels because a glance through any of the major periodicals reveals that women critics also debated the idea of literary sacralization and proposed alternative models for criticism. Margaret Oliphant frequently denounces the notion of the critic as prophet, or in her words, "Sir Oracle."<sup>35</sup> And, as Chapter Four demonstrates, Julia Wedgwood undermines the impulse to hero worship in her work for the *Contemporary Review*. Indeed, Wedgwood's regular contributions to that magazine regarding what she saw as the inter-related issues of religious faith, scientific advancement, democracy, women's suffrage, and literature make her an ideal candidate for Collini's public moralists. But Collini's and McKelvy's studies are emblematic of a larger gap in our scholarship: twentieth-century studies of Victorian criticism are limited by their adherence to a gendered view of genre in which the man of letters is heroic and the woman of letters non-existent or, at best, "exceptional."

Few of these studies acknowledge the motivation of such discourse: the instability of a "masculine" identity. As James Eli Adams argues, "the exclusionary force of Carlyle's 'hero as

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34. McKelvy, *The English Cult of Literature*, 15-16.

35. Oliphant, "New Books" (July 1879), 90.

man of letters' is charged with the energies and anxieties of masculine self-legitimation."<sup>36</sup>

And if male writers worked hard to construct this image, it seems that audiences had to make an effort to believe it. Indeed, the masculine image of the critic seems to have been, at best, a shared, willful delusion. Women's anonymity and male or gender-neutral personae certainly helped hide their contributions from twentieth-century scholars, but whether those masks were as effective at hiding women critics from their nineteenth-century audiences is another matter. In some cases, the identities of anonymous contributors, both male and female, were common knowledge among the London literary set. While Anne Mozley managed to keep her authorship virtually unknown, Oliphant's anonymous articles for *Blackwood's* were often recognizable to readers. Indeed, Mozley herself recognized Oliphant's style in the February 1873 issue of *Blackwood's*. After reading the review of *A Lady of the Last Century*, Mozley wrote to Blackwood "to make my small complaint against the reviewer of 'New Books' who of course is the truly wonderful Mrs Oliphant."<sup>37</sup> And readers would no longer need to guess as more and more periodicals adopted a signature policy.<sup>38</sup> As early as the 1860s, women like

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36. Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, 1. Adams focuses on "the ways in which male Victorian writers represent intellectual vocations as affirmations of masculine identity."

37. Mozley to Blackwood, 31 January 1873, MS 4308 [1873]: Folios 252-63. Mozley complained, "I daresay few people can take in a new book better by turning over a page here & there but I am sure you want the leading points taken in by the reviewer & her notice of Mrs Montague is founded on an entire misapprehension."

38. *Macmillan's* quietly began printing contributor's names in 1859, but in 1865 the *Fortnightly Review* became the first major journal to proclaim its policy of signature. New magazines like the *Contemporary Review* (1866) and the *Nineteenth Century* (1877) started out with an all-signature policy. The *Cornhill* moved to signature by 1878, and *Blackwood's* finally began to shift in the 1880s. The *Athenaeum*, however, remained anonymous throughout its run.

Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Julia Wedgwood, Juliet Pollock, Mary Arnold (later Mrs. Humphry Ward), and Frances Power Cobbe (just to name a few) were signing their critical articles and, thus, openly defying the gendered division of literary genres. Furthermore, even anonymous women critics often dropped the mask later when they re-published their journalism in book form.

Book publication is particularly important for Victorian women's critical writing because it demonstrates even more clearly the phenomenon of being hidden in plain sight. Given that men dominate canonical Victorian criticism, Barbara Onslow has suggested that "Perhaps male critics were more inclined to write critical books, reprint essays in volume form, and in their memoirs strip the cover of anonymity from their periodical work."<sup>39</sup> While there is no question that collections like Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* or Leslie Stephen's *Hours in a Library* helped canonize their authors for their contemporaries as well as twentieth-century scholars, it is worth noting that all of the women featured in this study published critical works in book form. Anne Mozley anonymously published two volumes of *Essays on Social Subjects from the Saturday Review* (1864 and 1865), the first of which went into three editions. Another collection entitled *Essays from Blackwood* (1892) was published posthumously, and the title page not only listed her name but also identified her as the author of *Essays on Social Subjects*. Julia Wedgwood collected her essays from the *Contemporary Review* and the *Spectator* in a volume entitled *Nineteenth-Century Teachers and Other Essays* (1909). And Anne Thackeray Ritchie published numerous essay collections—including *Toilers*

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39. Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 61.

*and Spinsters* (1874), *A Book of Sibyls* (1883), *Chapters from Some Memoirs* (1894), *Blackstick Papers* (1908), and *From the Porch* (1913)—drawing on her periodical writing for the *Cornhill* and *Macmillan's*. Although Margaret Oliphant never published her collected reviews from *Blackwood's*, she did republish some of her literary and historical writing.<sup>40</sup> All twelve chapters of her *Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II* (1869) first appeared in *Blackwood's* between February 1868 and August 1869, and five of them treat literary or artistic figures: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Alexander Pope, Samuel Richardson, David Hume, and William Hogarth. She also published two original monographs of literary criticism: *The Literary History of England in the End of the Eighteenth and Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* (1882) and *The Victorian Age of English Literature* (1892). And she contributed a critical essay on the Brontës to *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (1897), a collection of essays about women novelists by women novelists. Indeed, among the other contributors to that book of appreciations, Edna Lyall and Adeline Sergeant wrote critical introductions to others' works and Eliza Lynn Linton published *The Girl of the Period*, which collected her anti-feminist essays for the *Saturday Review*. We can add to this list of women who published their own critical collections or monographs the names of Mathilde Blind, Frances Power Cobbe, Leonora Blanche Lang, Vernon Lee, Alice Meynell, Helen Zimmern, and many others still.

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40. Oliphant was generally wary of collecting periodical essays into books. She concedes, "That literary essays of an high order should be reprinted from the magazines in which they find a sort of lodging for the moment, and set themselves up, as it were, as permanent members of society, in the actual dwelling house of a book, is no doubt highly desirable in some cases, and quite justifiable in others," but she warns against "mere critical articles of no particular importance one way or another, criticisms of a critic, reviews of a review, laid up and garnered for posterity within the boards of a book." "New Books" (July 1879), 90.

This impressive list of women's book-length criticism makes it increasingly difficult to believe that nineteenth-century readers really were unaware of the existence of women critics. If public discourse did not assign a sobriquet to the "lady critic," it was not because it could not see her but rather because it chose not to see her within the rather troubled category of the professional writer.

By the 1870s the push for professionalization required the critic to be more than a man of letters. T.W. Heyck has demonstrated that a disciplinary sense developed within letters during the last thirty years of the century.<sup>41</sup> In order to carve out disciplinary space for literary work, the generalist man of letters had to be transformed into a specialist of some sort. This was a difficult proposition. Traditionally, the meaning of "professional" was unambiguous. A professional was a gentleman who held the position of clergyman or lawyer. In the 1841 census, the only occupations considered "professional" were clergy, lawyers, and medical men; whereas many other occupations, including journalist, were listed under the heading "Other Educated Persons." It was not until the 1861 census that "Authors, editors, journalists" were elevated to the distinction of "professional" status.<sup>42</sup> But as the category "professional" expanded to include more occupations, it became necessary to establish some distinguishing criteria. According to W.J. Reader, these included: degree of recognition by the state (such as official honors and membership in the peerage); "respectability," which included

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41. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England*, 121.

42. Reader, *Professional Men*, 147.

matters of qualification (i.e. a university education) and “the way you got your bills paid.”<sup>43</sup> Writers were especially difficult to define according to this set of criteria because, as Reader explains, “some authors...were educated, cultured men (and women), and it was well known that they were welcomed, even sought after, in the best society. It was equally well known that the majority were not.”<sup>44</sup> The problem with the “artistic” group of professions (actors, artists, authors, musicians) was that they lacked “the kind of definite course of education required by the recognized professions. For none of them could you lay down exact qualifications: still less could you erect an examination ladder.”<sup>45</sup> The question of money was especially tricky for the journalist, whose work was clearly market-driven. On the one hand, a profession should provide stability as well as the ability to make a living; but on the other hand, a professional should have limited business with money itself—that is, he should not be paid directly by those he serves or deal too closely with actual commerce.<sup>46</sup> These criteria posed difficulties for journalists as they struggled to construct a professional identity. But even more fundamentally, journalists became mired in “the paradox of trying to base a professional authority on one’s ability to promote discussion of ‘general,’ or non-specialized knowledge.”<sup>47</sup> This paradox, according to Mark Hampton, “acted against attempts both to define and exclude

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43. Ibid., 158.

44. Ibid., 148.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 150-51.

47. Hampton, “Journalists and the Fragmentation of Knowledge,” 91, 97.

the 'non-journalist' and to secure control over journalist's [sic] authorship through the abolition of anonymous writing."<sup>48</sup> And women writers might have been glad for any obstacle to these efforts, for the "professional" emphasis on credentials and signature threatened their authorship.

Traditionally, journalism was seen as an "open profession" in which the "successful journalist was the one who, given a chance, could perform his duties;" thus, as Hampton explains, "no *a priori* system of licensing and exclusion was compatible with the idea of journalists as conveyors of 'general knowledge.'"<sup>49</sup> And journalism's functioning as an "open profession" was crucial to women's success in it. Of course, women faced greater obstacles in securing the chance to which Hampton refers (he is correct to choose the male pronoun for his assertion), but it is more or less true that a woman like Oliphant or Mozley could succeed as long as she could write what was required. The emphasis on credentials ("to define and exclude the non-critic") was particularly threatening to women because "licensing" for writers would most likely mean a University education. While such a requirement would exclude some men from the profession, it would shut out *every* woman.<sup>50</sup>

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48. Hampton, "Journalists and the Fragmentation of Knowledge," 98.

49. *Ibid.*, 91.

50. The first women's college at Cambridge opened in 1869, but admission to lectures was at the discretion of individual lecturers. Women were admitted to University examinations in 1872, but they were not granted degrees until 1947. At Oxford, the first women's colleges opened in 1879 with the same policy on admission to lectures. Women were admitted to examinations in 1884 and awarded degrees in 1920.

Journalism's other attempt to increase its professional credibility—the adoption of a signature policy—also posed unique difficulties for the woman critic. Certainly, the woman of letters stood to lose more than her male counterpart in the shift to signature because she often depended upon anonymity to combine literary work with domestic life. We have seen that anonymous publication provided women writers with a means of expression and income without necessarily committing their names or reputations in the public sphere. The move to signature would eliminate some of this flexibility and also would prevent women from using a masculine or gender-neutral voice to establish their critical authority.<sup>51</sup> Forced to append her signature, a woman writer would have to find new ways of managing readers' assumptions about gender. Furthermore, the rhetoric of pro-signature arguments worked more insidiously to elide women's authorship. Dallas Liddle finds that advocates for signature saw themselves as either "salesmen" or "sportsmen." Those who use the "salesmen" metaphor argue that periodical publishing is

a marketplace governed by relationships between buyers and sellers of ideas, all of whom were unitary economic actors. Anonymity was inimical to the free and fair working of this market, since it hid information (the author's identity and qualifications) relevant to the value of an intellectual product, and gave editors and writers an incentive to produce inferior work.<sup>52</sup>

We have already seen that emphasizing the economic aspects of journalism runs the risk of jeopardizing its professional status. But women writers would have good reason to avoid such

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51. This helps explain why Oliphant and Mozley wrote for journals that maintained anonymity long after others had given it up. They both relied on a masculine persona to win their readers' confidence before presenting potentially unsettling arguments. As Chapters Two and Three will demonstrate, they both worked to undermine elitist criticism from within.

52. Liddle, "Salesmen, Sportsmen, Mentors," 33.

a metaphor given the long history of comparing women's writing to prostitution. Indeed, Sarah Stickney Ellis implies this danger when she warns that "pity not envy, ought to be the meed of her who writes for the public" because the female author realizes too late that the very essence of [her] spirit, now embodied in a palpable form, has become an article of sale and bargain, tossed over from the hands of one workman to another, free alike to the touch of the prince and the peasant, and no longer to be reclaimed at will by the original possessor, let the world receive it as it may."<sup>53</sup>

If "salesmen" was an inauspicious identity for women critics, the metaphor of journalist as sportsman was no better. According to Liddle, this metaphor argued that "the arena of public discourse, like the playing fields of Eton and Rugby,"—places that excluded women—"was a place to test and strengthen moral character, and that the adoption of signature would foster responsibility and forthright manliness"—certainly not womanliness, and not critical integrity or any other gender-neutral quality—"among journalists."<sup>54</sup> So even if journalists were unable to agree on what constituted their professional credentials, the narratives of professionalization made it clear that women could not have them.

We have seen how the rhetoric of masculinization slights women critics by simply ignoring them. Indeed, there was no need to attack a "lady critic" as long as no one else was talking about her. But as women's role in reviewing became more widely known, such attacks did occur. Oliphant was a frequent target, and the viciousness of these attacks testifies to the power she wielded and the extent to which she threatened male (as well as some female) writers. In 1873, Anthony Trollope satirized her as Lady Carbury, the hack woman novelist in

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53. Ellis, *The Daughters of England*, 606.

54. Liddle, "Salesmen, Sportsmen, Mentors," 33.

*The Way We Live Now*. And Henry James drew an even crueler caricature of her in his short story “Greville Fane” (1892).<sup>55</sup> But it was only after Oliphant’s death that some of these writers openly assailed her role as a critic. In an obituary for *Harper’s Weekly*, Henry James reflected on Oliphant’s long career of reviewing for *Blackwood’s* and commented:

no writer of the day found a *porte-voix* nearer to hand or used it with an easier personal latitude and comfort. I should almost suppose in fact that no woman had ever, for half a century, had her personal ‘say’ so publicly and irresponsibly.<sup>56</sup>

Thomas Hardy, stung by Oliphant’s negative reception of *Jude the Obscure*, later belittled her review as “the screaming of a poor lady in *Blackwood*.”<sup>57</sup> And Oliphant was not the only woman critic to be attacked as moralizing. Rhoda Broughton satirized Geraldine Jewsbury in *A Beginner* (1894) as “Miss Grimston,” who did her reviewing “with a tomahawk.” And in a letter to Bentley in 1870, she caustically refers to “old Jewsbury’s pen dipped in vinegar and gall.”<sup>58</sup> Certainly, Broughton felt stymied by Jewsbury’s seemingly old-fashioned criteria for novels, so perhaps her deliberate ageism leads her inadvertently to sexism. Similarly, Elisabeth Jay has suggested that perhaps Trollope, James, and Hardy “felt [Oliphant’s] critical antennae to be more attuned to the desires of the general reader than to the experiments of the conscientious artist.”<sup>59</sup> James’s obituary supports this interpretation, for he describes her as a

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55. For a full discussion of these caricatures, see Jay, *Mrs Oliphant, “A Fiction to Herself,”* 37-39.

56. James, “London Notes, August 1897,” 1411.

57. Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 41-42.

58. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 177.

59. Jay, *Mrs Oliphant, “A Fiction to Herself,”* 39.

critic who “had small patience with new-fangled attitudes or with a finical conscience,” and in summing up her approach to novel-writing, he concludes that “There is scant enough question of ‘art’ in the matter.”<sup>60</sup>

But even though James and these other novelists probably felt they were defending the integrity of their art, we cannot ignore how, in each case, the stung author makes a special point of aligning the woman critic with a moralizing attitude—particularly because such attacks were effective. Oliphant reveals her sense of losing ground at the end of the century in her “Old Saloon” series, where she wryly comments that *Blackwood’s* “has her ladies too, but, shall we own it? perhaps loves them less.”<sup>61</sup> And the tone of Oliphant’s other late-century series, “The Looker-on,” is, as Solveig Robinson describes it, “positively hostile to the modern world.”<sup>62</sup> Oliphant’s return to a masculine voice and her increasingly weary tone can be understood as a reaction to “the male-dominated literary world of the late 1880s.”<sup>63</sup> The discourse of professionalization was taking a toll, and a new range of distinctly “masculine” forms of the novel, such as adventure stories, were gaining in popularity. I agree with Elisabeth Jay’s argument that “Mrs Oliphant was all too aware of these processes at work and deliberately used her access to literary periodicals to counter the influence of the male literary mafia,” but sadly, I would add that her resistance had little effect on the overall view of

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60. James, “London Notes, August 1897,” 1412, 1413.

61. Oliphant, “In Maga’s Library,” 127.

62. Robinson, “Expanding a ‘Limited Orbit,’” 200, 202.

63. Jay, *Mrs Oliphant, “A Fiction to Herself,”* 78.

criticism.<sup>64</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was no change in the general attitude that critical work was men's work. Indeed, in *Press Work for Women* (1904), Frances Low warns young women writers that "Reviewing" is totally beyond the grasp of women journalists since this is an assignment sought after by "University men of high distinction."<sup>65</sup>

And the legacy of those late nineteenth-century attacks on the moralizing woman critic is with us still, for they had a profound and unacknowledged influence on the way later scholars view women's criticism. I have argued that the "lady critic" was missing from social commentary for most of the century, but there is one notable exception, albeit a fictional one, who is invoked throughout the century: Mrs. Grundy. Originally a character in Thomas Morton's play, *Speed the Plough* (1798), Mrs. Grundy came to symbolize stuffy Victorian propriety and was invoked repeatedly in periodical criticism. In *The Subjection of Women*, J.S. Mill equates Mrs. Grundy with received opinion and propriety when he refers to "reducing the minds of women to such a nullity, that they have no opinions but those of Mrs Grundy."<sup>66</sup> In "Candour in English Fiction," Thomas Hardy references Grundyism as the source of the circulating libraries' power to censor novelists in the name of wholesome English literature.<sup>67</sup>

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64. Ibid.

65. Low, *Press Work for Women*, 12. The book collected a series of essays originally published in the *Girls' Realm* in 1903.

66. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 377.

67. Hardy, "Candour in English Fiction," 19. He argues that the artist is required to "believe his literary conscience, do despite to his best imaginative instincts by arranging a dénouement which he knows to be indescribably unreal and meretricious, but dear to the Grundyist and subscriber."

Although this character figured more as a finger-wagging matron than a pen-wielding periodical critic, the late-century attacks on real women critics follow seamlessly on this narrative. And later scholars often accept it without question. Even feminist scholars like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar unfairly brand Margaret Oliphant a moralist by selectively quoting from her reviews of sensation.<sup>68</sup> But the moral view of criticism promoted by these women was much more complex than most studies admit, and it is by no means a uniquely feminine concern. Indeed, many male critics operated under a distinctly moral agenda during this period. As we have already seen, Carlyle envisioned his heroic man of letters as a new source of moral discourse to replace the waning traditional moral authority. And although Matthew Arnold urged a dose of Hellenism to balance what he saw as England's overbearing Hebraism, his pursuit of culture was designed to have a moral influence on individuals. Similarly, women critics' moral concerns were essentially social and focused on the uses of literature for the individual reader and the larger society. Many of the women discussed in the following chapters made a concerted effort to cultivate the critical skills of the ordinary reader. But Victorian women critics were caught in a double bind: although the highest function of criticism in the Victorian era is recognized as a moral one, women critics who take a moral approach inevitably look like "Mrs. Grundy."

This predisposition to view women critics as moralizing also leads scholars to misconstrue certain aspects of their methodology, particularly their focus on audience. Their

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68. See Chapter Two for a lengthier discussion of how Oliphant's reputation was shaped by feminist criticism of the 1970s, including Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*.

attention to a work's possible effects on readers is not only or always motivated by a concern for the text's moral influence. As I have indicated, some women writers take a rhetorical approach to literature in order to model critical reading skills for their audience.

Furthermore, attention to a novel's so-called "moral influence" is often another way of analyzing how novels and other texts form subjectivity. When Oliphant condemns the sensation novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda Broughton, she points not only to their depiction of the typical Englishwoman, but also to the real Englishwomen readers "who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them."<sup>69</sup> As "women readers" themselves, women critics had to be aware that literary texts were arguments that could shape the way readers view themselves and the world around them. Indeed, the stereotype of the susceptible woman reader found support in novels like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which depicted the sad fate of women who overindulge in fiction. Furthermore, women critics sometimes employ moral rhetoric to indirectly advance their opinions on other issues such as aesthetics, realism, mass culture, and professions for women. But because they focus on the social uses of literature, women like Oliphant, Mozley, Wedgwood, and Ritchie fit poorly into a critical history that emphasizes aesthetics and form. We have seen how Oliphant tangled with younger writers like James and Hardy over issues of form in the 1880s and 1890s. By the mid-twentieth century, the work of these women writers would be inimical to the values of the New Criticism.

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69. Oliphant, "Novels" (September 1867), 275.

By most accounts, the trajectory of Victorian criticism culminates here in the establishment of academic English departments. According to scholars as diverse as John Gross, Terry Eagleton, and Kelly Mays, after the “man of letters” and his amateur colleagues had been deposed, the twentieth century would soon welcome the professional cultural elite of the New Criticism.<sup>70</sup> Criticism becomes the province of academic professors of English, a vocation rather than a journalistic genre. This argument is compelling, especially for today’s academic critics who tend to see themselves as distinct from newspaper reviewers, but it is misleading insofar as it portrays a smooth and complete transition of critical authority. Contrary to these accounts, Carol Atherton argues that the history of English as an academic discipline and the professionalization of criticism were separate and sometimes conflicting processes:

Rather than undergoing a straightforward assimilation into academic structures, criticism was the subject of ongoing debates as to what it involved, who was to carry it out and what kind of knowledge it was to produce: it continued to be practised outside the universities, and was underpinned by differing concepts of intellectual authority.<sup>71</sup>

The narrative that moves from man of letters to academic critic encourages us to believe that periodical reviewing lost its audience to academia, when in fact academic critics were unsure of their audience. Atherton’s explanation recalls the problems encountered in earlier attempts at professionalization:

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70. In “The Disease of Reading,” Mays argues that the discourse of critic as expert was so successful that it ironically worked to undermine rather than solidify the periodical reviewer’s professional status: by urging the professionalization of criticism, journalists paved the way for university-based literary experts.

71. Atherton, *Defining Literary Criticism*, 73.

Academics in other disciplines (such as law, medicine or the sciences) produced knowledge that was used on behalf of the general public, but not by members of the public themselves: instead, it was used by other academics and professionals, who acted as a medium through which knowledge was diffused and put to work. Academics in these fields were therefore writing for their professional peer group, rather than the public at large. Yet the audience for literary criticism was unclear. ... If criticism was justified in Arnoldian terms, with reference to its social, moral and spiritual role, then its utility would depend on its readership—and to reach a general audience, criticism would, of course, need to be non-specialist.<sup>72</sup>

Determined to avoid the paradox of specializing in general knowledge, English departments were initially designed to produce anything but Arnoldian critics. Atherton's analysis of early exams and examiners' reports from Oxford's English School "suggests that the development of individual judgement was not considered a priority, and that the judgements students were expected to discuss were actually made by others, transmitted to students through lectures and reading and reproduced by them in examinations."<sup>73</sup> And while the story at Cambridge is rather different—the English Tripos under Arthur Quiller Couch did expect evaluation and individual judgment—the wholesale borrowing of historical methodology still failed to address the skills necessary for literary criticism.<sup>74</sup> Ambivalent about both its purpose and audience, early academic English had very little in common with literary criticism.

Of course, some of the key figures of early English departments, including John Churton Collins and Arthur Quiller Couch, continued to write for periodicals. That these men continued to seek periodicals as an outlet suggests important differences between

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72. Ibid.

73. Ibid., 34.

74. Ibid., 55.

academic English and periodical criticism. But the increasing number of signatures that included the prefix “Prof.” or suffix “Litt.D.” could very well have created the impression that university men had taken over reviewing. To the extent that literary criticism was perceived to be moving into the universities, women critics like Anne Ritchie and Alice Zimmern increasingly take up the issue of women’s education in conjunction with their literary essays and reviews. And on the flip side, male literary critics like Charles Whibley readily set aside literary topics to attack the push for women’s university education. Our prevailing narrative of academic criticism reinforces the idea that critics were men by failing to account for the women critics who could not become university professors, but those women stand out on the pages of periodicals, actively claiming academic space for themselves. The assumption that criticism becomes an academic, and therefore all-male discipline by the beginning of the twentieth century overlooks a significant conflict between literary critics and advocates for women’s university degrees in the pages of periodicals.

It makes sense that any woman critic who was attuned to these various masculinizing discourses would seek ways to preserve her place in literary culture. Recognizing the potentially damaging consequences for their own careers in the field of letters, a number of women critics offered alternative foundations for critical authority. In the following chapters, I examine how some of the most prolific women critics for monthly and quarterly magazines challenged the prevailing narratives of literary criticism in the nineteenth century. Rather than offer an exhaustive examination of Victorian women’s critical contributions, I offer case studies to explore the rhetorical strategies women writers used to establish their authority and negotiate the gendered assumptions in nineteenth-century critical discourse. These case

studies reveal how Victorian women's criticism is elided in their own time and ours. By studying these previously unexplored facets of the development of the genre of literary criticism, this project aims to expand our understanding of Victorian literary criticism.

Chapters Two and Three focus on women critics who actively challenged the elitist critical trends that emerged in the 1850s and gathered strength over the second half of the century. The pervasiveness of the woman reader as a topos for Victorian critics might lead us to believe that criticism in the Victorian era was primarily a reader-centered activity. But much of the anxious discourse surrounding the woman reader, as Kate Flint and others have argued, served to empower male critics and male readers who would police women's reading. And women were not the only source of critical anxiety. Critics frequently defined their criticism and their audience in opposition to some other vilified group of readers, from women to the working class to Philistines.<sup>75</sup> Kelly Mays has demonstrated that many critics, in their attempt to professionalize criticism, figured the entire reading public as sick and themselves as the doctors who could cure the "disease of reading." So despite sustained attention to a text's moral influence on the reader, the second half of the century saw a decline in critics' attention to and respect for the reader in matters of taste. In contrast to these critics, Margaret Oliphant and Anne Mozley adopt a reader-centered philosophy that validates different interpretive communities and empowers readers to make their own critical decisions. And while neither of these writers makes overtly feminist arguments—indeed, previous

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75. Arnold's well known campaign for "culture" urged his audience to distinguish themselves from the middle-class Philistines by devoting themselves to the pursuit of "sweetness and light."

criticism has seen them as conservative—their defense of readers in general tends to defuse the arguments directed specifically at women. For both of these women, defending readers offered an indirect way of defending their own position within a masculinized genre. In Chapter Two, “Margaret Oliphant and the Function of Criticism,” I consider Oliphant’s attention to audience throughout her career. Her treatment of the penny public in the 1850s establishes her rhetorical approach to criticism and allows me to resituate her infamous attacks on sensation fiction within her understanding of middle-class reading practices. And these same concerns motivate Oliphant’s criticism of Matthew Arnold in the 1870s and 1880s. Oliphant challenges the critical habit of preaching down to readers and reminds her colleagues that, no matter how beautiful their theories, they must first reach an audience if they wish to have any effect. Chapter Three, “Sympathetic Criticism: Anne Mozley, Gender, and Genre,” analyzes Mozley’s use of conservative gender ideology to underwrite women’s critical authority. Mozley doesn’t question the idea that women are naturally more feeling than men or that this trait uniquely qualifies them to write novels. But if novels are designed to make readers feel, the ideal critic, according to Mozley, should possess a decent store of what the Victorians considered the feminine faculty of sentiment or emotion. From this perspective, the ideology that promoted “lady novelists” could just as easily authorize the lady critic. Using Mozley’s 1859 review of *Adam Bede* as a foundational text, I demonstrate how Mozley blurs gender ideology to define criticism as the union of feminine feeling and masculine rationality.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the rhetorical strategies used by signed women writers to promote their critical authority. James Eli Adams observes how “male Victorian

writers represent intellectual vocations as affirmations of masculine identity,” but we can see that many women writers counter those efforts by representing intellectual labor and criticism as either feminine or gender-neutral. Both Julia Wedgwood and Anne Ritchie find ways of writing women into masculine discourse. In Chapter Four, “The ‘Other of Science’: Julia Wedgwood on Literature as the Moral Ideal,” I analyze Wedgwood’s distinction between “the truth of morals” and “the truth of science” to show how she views literature’s part in the crisis of faith and doubt. Like many Victorians, she believes that literature can replace religious orthodoxy as a balancing narrative to science. But Wedgwood’s dialectical approach makes it impossible for her to champion any ultimate authority, and this oppositional stance puts her into interesting dialogue with other nineteenth-century critical theories, including Carlyle’s notion of the “hero as man of letters,” George Eliot’s arguments for sympathy, and *fin-de-siècle* ideas about the art of fiction. In Chapter Five, “‘Links to the Past’: Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Tradition, and the Woman Critic,” I examine how “Thackeray’s Daughter” uses the literary past to form and reform women’s role in canons, criticism, and the university. By exploiting her own position as a member of the literary aristocracy, as well as her readers’ nostalgia, she blurs the lines between old and new forms of literary critical authority and creates a space for women’s intellectual authority.

It is easy to see from our current vantage point that the Victorians told themselves a story about gender and genre that had more than a few holes in it. But we must also acknowledge that our own stories about criticism are no less littered with contradictions, elisions, and self-serving motives. One place where this is apparent is in the resources for searching Victorian writers, such as the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* and the *Oxford*

*Dictionary of National Biography*. These resources often unwittingly propagate the gender biases of both the nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century by labeling women as “miscellaneous writer” or “essayist” where their male counterparts are more likely to be labelled as “critic” or “man of letters.” And the codification of such terms in our databases becomes a greater concern as older print indexes transition to digital platforms where every line of text can be a search term. For example, if one types the word “critic” into the contributor search field on the online *Wellesley Index*, that researcher will discover that out of the 177 people labelled “critic,” only nine of them (or 5%) are women. None of the women we might expect to find, including the women in this study, are included among those nine, but many of them are listed as novelists, poets, translators, biographers, essayists, historical writers (but not historians), miscellaneous writers, or simply “wife of...” It seems that although many Victorian women critics challenged the idea that some genres were better suited to certain genders, we have since reinforced gendered genres and pushed these writers to the margins by calling their writing something other than literary criticism. My study resituates four women as critics and their “miscellaneous” writing as criticism, and I demonstrate that it really matters whether we call these women “critic” or something else. Such labels, and the cultural weight they carry, determine not only who gets read, studied, and reprinted, but also how we define entire periods and genres. Our decisions about which parts of the past we wish to acknowledge will undoubtedly shape our future.

We still do not recognize Victorian women critics because many of our established narratives obscure them, just as Victorian discourses of literary criticism obscured them in their time. The history we tell ourselves about criticism favors a progressive timeline that

moves from a moral approach at mid-century to an “artistic” approach by the end of the century, and ultimately to the academic criticism of the twentieth century. By tracing the critic as envisioned by Carlyle, Arnold, and Pater, many scholars have justified this same narrative. But this argument is self-fulfilling. That is, if we think criticism developed according to a certain process, then we only see what fits that model. And when we equate that process with progress, we not only devalue the contributions of earlier writers, we also privilege the present as the most evolved approach to criticism. This suggests that the established history of criticism says a lot more about what we value now than what Victorian writers or readers actually valued.

Furthermore, given the nature of our blindness, it is not enough to recover women who wrote criticism in the nineteenth century. Solveig Robinson’s anthology for Broadview Press, *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women* (2003), collects essays and reviews by eighteen female reviewers. This anthology is cause for hope, especially since it makes it feasible for one to include women’s criticism in an undergraduate syllabus. But Broadview’s most recent collection of Victorian criticism, *The Victorian Art of Fiction* (2009), hardly registers the impact of Robinson’s research: it includes essays by two women (George Eliot and Margaret Oliphant), five men, and two anonymous authors. Such circumstances beg the question of why the canon of criticism has proven so resistant to expansion. Alison Booth’s analysis of the disciplinary biases that neglect women’s collective biography can help us understand why our perception of the Victorian critic hasn’t changed. As Booth has demonstrated in *How to Make It as a Woman* (2004), “catalogs of notable women have flourished in plain view for centuries, while generation after generation laments the absence of

women of the past.<sup>76</sup> This is partly because literary studies often neglect “transient” texts, and few things are more transient than reviews, especially those of now forgotten books. But reviews at least have the advantage of looking like literary criticism. Other forms of women’s critical writing—such as more discursive essays that consider literature alongside social subjects—are demoted for generic or aesthetic reasons. And feminist studies have overlooked women’s critical writing in favor of biographical, poetic, and fictional genres, perhaps because these offer clearer examples of women’s authorial agency. Unfortunately, that focus reinforces the gendered division of genres by eliding women’s contributions to the traditionally “masculine” field of criticism.

We are still learning how to see the woman critic: how to see through the personae used by anonymous writers, how to see the progressive ends that justify their seemingly conservative means, how to see beyond the established narratives of literary history, and how to see through the gendered genre labels that are still with us and recognize critical interventions when they occur. This effort to expand our view is necessary for feminist scholarship, but more broadly, it is necessary for our Victorian scholarship. Thus, by presenting a fuller portrait of these individual authors, I hope to revise our view of Victorian theories of criticism and fiction.

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76. Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman*, 3.

## Chapter 2 Margaret Oliphant and the Function of Criticism

*“Mr. Arnold does not seem to take into consideration the important, and we should say essential, matter of reaching the special audience to which he preaches...”*<sup>1</sup>

One of the Victorian era’s most prolific and influential critics was born in the 1820s, started out writing imaginative literature, ventured a first critical work in the early 1850s, and wrote numerous periodical essays about the function of criticism over the second half of the century. The prevailing histories of criticism will lead most students of English literature to guess, with great confidence, that this critic must be Matthew Arnold. But in this chapter I want to demonstrate why the better answer is Margaret Oliphant. As house reviewer for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, one of the most prestigious monthlies, Oliphant had her finger on the pulse of Victorian literary culture from 1854 until 1897. She published smart assessments of William Thackeray, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and Charles Dickens, a series on “Modern Light Literature” that covered six genres (including science, history, travel, art, poetry, and society), and a meditation on “Modern Novelists Great and Small” that considered the impact of *Jane Eyre* and the ascendancy of the “lady novelist”—and all of this was just in the 1850s. Over the course of her career, aside from her impressive output of fiction, she would write almost 250 non-fiction articles for *Blackwood’s* while also contributing reviews to several other major periodicals. In *The Equivocal Virtue* (1966), Vineta and Robert Colby asserted: “Next to Matthew Arnold, no critic worked harder than she did to remove British

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1. Oliphant, “New Books” (April 1871), 458.

literary insularity and provincialism.”<sup>2</sup> But in the forty years since the Colbys published their study of Oliphant, she has received little attention as a literary critic. Biographies by Elisabeth Jay and Merryn Williams, along with D.J. Trela’s edited collection *Margaret Oliphant: Essays on a Gentle Subversive*, have drawn much-needed attention to the complexity of Oliphant’s views on women, sexuality, realism, and biography, but still little attention has been given to Oliphant’s criticism as a body of work. We begin to see why she has been unjustly overlooked as a critic when we consider the kind of attention she has received.

When feminist critics began recovering nineteenth-century women writers in the 1970s, Oliphant seemed to fall on the wrong side of most interests. Elaine Showalter’s groundbreaking feminist study, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), directly quotes Oliphant just twice, and both quotations come from her 1867 review of novels by Rhoda Broughton and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Showalter quotes Oliphant’s description of sensation heroines as women who “live in a voluptuous dream” and notes, “Mrs. Oliphant, in an indignant review of Broughton’s novels, proclaimed her feeling that ‘it is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them.’”<sup>3</sup> This comment, which unfairly characterizes Oliphant as a moralizing prude when taken out of context, would be quoted again and again in the 1990s as scholars found renewed interest in sensation fiction as a mode of feminist discourse. If Oliphant’s two reviews of sensation gained her notoriety,

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2. Colby and Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue*, 187.

3. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 160, 175.

her 1863 novel *Salem Chapel*, which uses a number of sensational plot elements, garnered some attention for its more feminist treatment of women's agency, sexuality, and motherhood. But these efforts to interpret *Salem Chapel* as a feminist sensation novel fail to reconcile the reviews to the fiction, and thus they inevitably depict Oliphant as hypocritical (and even mercenary) for publishing a negative review of sensation novels in the same issue of *Blackwood's* where *Salem Chapel* was being serialized. Though recovery work usually tries to complicate the patriarchal assumptions that denigrate women's writing, critical attention to Oliphant over the last thirty years has often reiterated the judgments of nineteenth- and twentieth-century canon-makers. Indeed, since her death in 1897, Oliphant has been characterized as moralizing, unartistic, and commercially-motivated. Henry James's obituary for Oliphant emphasized her "extraordinary fecundity" and portrayed her as a hack, albeit a "heroic" one.<sup>4</sup> James indicates her lack of artistry: "She had small patience with new-fangled attitudes or with a finical conscience."<sup>5</sup> And he describes her as "a person whose eggs are not all in one basket, not all her imagination in service at once. There is scant enough question of 'art' in the matter."<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hardy characterized Oliphant as a rabid Mrs. Grundy in his Preface to the 1912 edition of *Jude the Obscure*, in which he referred to her review as "the

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4. James, "London Notes, August 1897," 1411, 1412.

5. Ibid., 1412.

6. Ibid., 1413.

screaming of a poor lady in *Blackwood*.<sup>7</sup> And Virginia Woolf wrote in *Three Guineas* (1938) that Oliphant “sold her brain, ...prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty.”<sup>8</sup>

What these writers denigrate, and what I argue must be positively reappraised if we are to understand Margaret Oliphant’s criticism and its force in shaping Victorian literary taste, is her understanding of the relationship between author and reader. Her reader-centered approach damaged her reputation at the end of the nineteenth century as aesthetics came to be more highly valued than a work’s moral or social use and as a writer’s “artistic” qualities came to be measured in direct opposition to his or her concern with readers. It is productive to consider how the different reputations of Oliphant and Arnold hinge on their different approaches to readers. Scholars have credited Arnold with effecting a sweeping change in the tone and method of Victorian reviewing and, as John Woolford has argued, he did so by encouraging critics to put themselves “*on the poet’s side*” rather than the reader’s.<sup>9</sup> The seriousness of Arnold’s critical theory rests largely on his alienation of the reader, whereas Oliphant’s second-rate position rests on her abiding interest in audience and the rhetorical functions of literature. The consequences of this distinction for histories of criticism have been immense. Arnold’s status as the critic who dragged Victorian reviewers out of the muck and into the serious profession of criticism has kept him in print throughout the twentieth-

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7. Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 41-42. John Stock Clarke rightly notes that this article was not at all representative of Oliphant’s critical method. It seems unfortunate that one of the few articles Oliphant’s contemporaries could unmistakably attribute to her was so unlike her other work.

8. Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 91-92.

9. Woolford, “Periodicals and the Practice of Literary Criticism, 1855-64,” 125.

century and ensured that most students of English literature have at least a passing familiarity with his assertions about criticism, culture, and “sweetness and light.” On the other hand, Oliphant’s work has rarely been in print during the twentieth century, and readers who are familiar with her criticism are most likely to associate her with condemnatory remarks about female sensation novelists.

In this chapter, I explore Oliphant’s reader-centered approach not only to reframe her infamous position on sensation fiction but also to clarify her critical perspective. More broadly, I argue that her criticism is essential to a complete understanding of the Victorian field of literature and its relation to social and moral issues. I start by demonstrating how Oliphant’s insistence on raising the reader’s critical awareness fuels her critique of Arnold’s criticism in the 1870s and 1880s. While both Oliphant and Arnold thought that literature could produce a better society, they differed significantly on the engine of this change. Whereas Arnold believed that the function of criticism is to bring the populace up to his standards by introducing them to “the best that has been known and thought,” Oliphant thought the best way to combat provincialism was to make readers aware of themselves as part of an interpretive community.<sup>10</sup> After establishing this basic tenet of Oliphant’s criticism, I trace her efforts to raise readers’ critical awareness throughout her career beginning with her response to the penny public in the 1850s and her reviews of sensation fiction in the 1860s. Finally, I read Oliphant’s sensation novel, *Salem Chapel*, as yet another venue for working through the complexities of the Victorian critic’s position in society and an argument against

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10. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, 36.

claiming ultimate authority from such a tenuous position. As Oliphant well knew, critical opinion is subject to forces beyond the literature being discussed. While such forces eventually situated Arnold's aesthetics as the privileged critical narrative, a more complete history should recognize that Oliphant's reader-centered criticism was a viable and productive discourse for many years and for many Victorians. This chapter reclaims this perspective and also demonstrates that Oliphant's criticism was, surprisingly, better suited to achieve Arnold's goals than his own method.

### **The Rhetorical Function of Criticism**

Throughout her criticism, Oliphant's rhetorical approach is displayed in her attention to how literature affects an audience. Perhaps the best representation of this method is her notion of the "sliding-scale of fame," which she introduced in her 1855 essay, "Modern Novelists Great and Small." She asserts, "Greatness is always comparative: there are few things so hard to adjust as the sliding-scale of fame."<sup>11</sup> Although she gives due praise to the "highest platform" of literature, she suggests that there is a real need for the second tier because it "finds a straight road and a speedy entrance to the natural heart which has but admired and wondered at the master minstrel's loftier tale."<sup>12</sup> So while she distinguishes between major and minor works, high and low culture, and even intellectual versus sentimental fiction, above all she emphasizes matters of genre and audience. This emphasis on the social work performed

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11. Oliphant, "Modern Novelists Great and Small," 554.

12. Ibid.

by literature is the hallmark of Oliphant's critical method. Oliphant sees literature as an argument and a maker of subjectivity. From this perspective, the critic's job is to analyze the text's motives. Outlining the "faculties necessary for the critic," Oliphant insists that above all, he must have true sympathetic insight, such as will lay open to him the meanings, not always clearly expressed, the motif, not always distinctly indicated, of his subjects. The true critic should see more than the book before him—he should see the mind that produced it; he should be able to catch at full tide the currents of thought that brought it into being, the mental convulsion which it marks, or the ripening existence of which it is the fruit. All those subtle mental influences, which are as dew and sunshine to the spiritual seed, he should note in their unseen courses.<sup>13</sup>

Here Oliphant's desire to see "the mind that produced" the work foregrounds the text's motives and considers how and why it achieves its effect. Her attempt to "catch at full tide the currents of thought that brought [the book] into being" attends to the work's social and historical context. And her reference to "those subtle mental influences, which are as dew and sunshine to the spiritual seed" suggests a connection between her moral concerns and her view of literature as rhetoric. She wants to trace the mental influences that produced the finished product, but she also recognizes that mental influences—such as those that come from literature—have spiritual consequences for the audience. Barbara Onslow has argued that Oliphant's "insistence on addressing the social context in which art flourishes" stems from her conviction that "art is vital to the spiritual health of the nation."<sup>14</sup> Certainly, Oliphant's 1867 review of sensation novels testifies to this when she refers to the "the national mind which

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13. Oliphant, "New Books" (April 1871), 440. Vineta and Robert Colby point to this statement as evidence of Oliphant's psychological brand of criticism, "concentrating attention more on the personality and temperament of the writer than on his artistry or style." *The Equivocal Virtue*, 188.

14. Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 72.

produced” wholesome English novels.<sup>15</sup> And as we will see, Oliphant reads literature as a barometer of the morals and worldview of its audience.

In connecting art to the health of the culture, Oliphant’s criticism shares a marked similarity with Matthew Arnold’s. Ironically, while this interest has counted as a strike against Oliphant, it has served as one of the primary justifications for Arnold’s canonicity. Despite their different reputations, these two seemingly antithetical critics were working toward much the same goal. In “The Literary Influence of Academies” (1864), Arnold cites Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve’s assertion that among the French, “the first consideration for us is not whether we are amused and pleased by a work... [but] whether *we were right* in being amused with it.” Arnold argues that English readers need to develop just such an intellectual or artistic conscience. Just as one is willing “to admit a high standard of action, an ideal authoritatively correcting his everyday moral habits,” Arnold wants “a like deference to a standard higher than one’s own habitual standard in intellectual matters.”<sup>16</sup> Oliphant’s much-cited reviews of sensation novels express a similar desire. She wants her readers to consider whether they *should* enjoy Mary Braddon’s scandalous tales and what the consequences of their response might be. It’s certainly true that she did not want her audience to revel in images of immorality, but it’s not simply that. Like Arnold, Oliphant appeals to her readers’ literary conscience when she says that they should feel ashamed of their acceptance of such fiction.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Oliphant, “Novels” (September 1867), 257.

16. Arnold, “The Literary Influence of Academies,” 157.

17. Oliphant, “Novels” (September 1867), 275. She echoes Arnold in presenting literary taste as a question of national character: “We confess to having felt a sense of injury in

Both Oliphant and Arnold believe that criticism, by developing the sort of literary conscience Sainte-Beuve describes, can improve both individuals and the larger society. But a giant gulf separates their ideas about what that criticism should look like and how it should address its readers.

Arnold believed that English criticism, particularly in periodicals, was marked by an unhealthy collusion between the reader and critic. Because periodicals were governed by the demands of their readers, rather than a higher, objective aesthetic standard, Arnold asserts, “in the bulk of the intellectual work of a nation which has no centre, no intellectual metropolis like an academy, ...there is observable a *note of provinciality*.”<sup>18</sup> Arnold argued that the average editorial relied upon a “Corinthian style” which “has no soul; all it exists for, is to get its ends, to make its points, to damage its adversaries, to be admired, to triumph.”<sup>19</sup> He believed that this type of criticism was more about putting on a performance for readers than doing justice to an author or a work of art. For Arnold, the best way to reform the performing critic is to distract him from his audience.

Oliphant also complained about the state of criticism, but she argued that criticism suffers when it does not pay enough attention to the reader. Oliphant’s essays and reviews

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our national pride when our solemn contemporary, the ‘Revue des Deux Mondes,’ held up in one of its recent numbers the names of Miss Annie Thomas and Mr. Edmund Yates to the admiration of the world as representative novelists of England.” (Oliphant mistakenly identifies Thomas as the author of Rhoda Broughton’s novels.) Ibid., 260-61.

18. Arnold, “The Literary Influence of Academies,” 163.

19. Ibid., 170.

demonstrate that she was well aware of the increasing critical disdain for the reader—exemplified by Arnold—and that she opposed this trend. But her efforts can be traced back to the 1850s, suggesting that the first half of the nineteenth century was not exactly a golden age for readers. While Woolford describes critics of the 1850s as being firmly on the reader's side, this is not entirely true. For one thing, even though many journalists figured themselves as helpful guides to readers, they often did so patronizingly. Indeed, Dallas Liddle reads most instances of the “instructor” metaphor as inherently unequal:

Instead of figuring readers as rational economic decision makers in a marketplace of ideas, or as audience and referees at a fairly played contest of views, [reviewers] prefer to construct them as students sitting uncritically at the feet of a mentor. The student's belief in the teacher's superior knowledge and authority is therefore a necessary precondition of the relationship; the class cannot be conducted if the students think they are the teacher's equals.<sup>20</sup>

Once again, Margaret Oliphant's criticism is an exception. Though she frequently refers to the critic as a guide, Oliphant insists on treating the reader as an equal. For example, when Oliphant praises the cultural work of essayists in 1879, she implies that even the critical guide sometimes finds herself in the role of student:

At all times, the greater part of us, whom labour and want of leisure, if not want of power, forbid to be students, are thankful for the services of the guide who communicates the result of his own studies in an easy and comprehensible form.<sup>21</sup>

This also shows that, for Oliphant, the critic's job is predicated on the reader's deficiency of opportunity, not intellect. Because she allows that her readers can judge for themselves, she warns fellow critics against betraying their trust. In a complaint about

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20. Liddle, “Salesmen, Sportsmen, Mentors,” 51.

21. Oliphant, “New Books” (July 1879), 89.

puffing—that is, the critical practice of praising the work of friends or colleagues—she describes a readership that once trusted reviewers but has found, on their own judgment, that reviewers’ recommendations are sometimes dishonest. She complains,

Since the literary caterers, with very few exceptions, betook themselves to puffing, and to the dubious task of representing garbage only fit for cat’s-meat, as pieces of the primest quality, men have grown shy through frequent disappointment, and will not allow themselves to be seduced into anticipatory ecstasies even by the most tempting bill of fare.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, she chastises fellow critics for putting the interests of publishers before readers and making readers cynical. Oliphant grounds her critical authority in being an ordinary reader herself, and this is her essential difference from Arnold. Whereas Arnold’s critic guides those who do not know any better to what Arnold himself believes is best, Oliphant’s critic understands her readers’ taste and guides them to what they would choose for themselves given the time and leisure to wade through everything.

While Oliphant recognized the affinities between Arnold and herself, she used her *Blackwood’s* reviews to challenge his tone of superiority during the 1870s and 1880s. In her 1870 review of “New Books,” she draws a clear line between her own critical persona and Arnold’s:

We do not intend...to present ourselves before the public as the Honest Critic; at least if we do so, it is not with the elevated pretensions of a recent beginning, caused, we imagine, by a similar sentiment to our own, but sustained by a more perfect consciousness of that divine and perpetual certainty of being always right, which characterizes Matthew Arnold and his friends.<sup>23</sup>

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22. Oliphant, “*Maud*. By Alfred Tennyson,” 312.

23. Oliphant, “New Books” (May 1870), 629.

She takes up Arnold's pretensions again in 1879 when she unfavorably contrasts his *Mixed*

*Essays* to Leslie Stephen's *Hours in a Library*, stating that both Stephen and Arnold

have intellectual endowments much superior to those which are general to their class, or to any class; but yet they are superiors among equals, indisputable representatives of their kind. The grand difference between them is, that Mr. Stephen puts forth no pretensions to be a Pope, or even a grand inquisitor; while Mr. Arnold cannot help letting us see that he is at least of the stuff of which infallible beings are made.<sup>24</sup>

Arnold's rhetorical style is a stark contrast to Oliphant's own efforts to put herself on an equal plane with her audience. Oliphant's habit of aligning herself with readers and refusing to put on authorial airs has branded her middlebrow, but it would be a mistake to confuse Oliphant's anti-elitism with anti-intellectualism. Elisabeth Jay reminds us that Oliphant "was by any standards a remarkably well-read woman."<sup>25</sup> Oliphant possessed plenty of cultural capital, but she adopted the rhetorical stance that best allowed her to share it with her readers. Vineta Colby similarly notes that while Oliphant "had many literary gifts and was intellectually far superior to the average...she sometimes posed as an anti-intellectual, indifferent to the profundities of scholarship and aesthetics" in order to place herself on an equal footing with her audience and thereby encourage their intellectual engagement.<sup>26</sup> This pose, which has been so often misinterpreted and used to denigrate Oliphant's status as a critic, is central to her rhetorical approach to criticism and her critique of Arnold.

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24. Oliphant, "New Books" (July 1879), 90.

25. Jay, *Mrs Oliphant, "A Fiction to Herself"*; 235. Jay also notes that Oliphant was "a keen supporter of such projects as Blackwood's Ancient Classics for English Readers, which brought the 'sine qua non' of the cultivated mind within the reach of the formerly disenfranchised, such as Dissenters and women readers."

26. Colby and Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue*, 201.

Oliphant especially dislikes criticism that treats the reader as inferior or ignores the reader entirely, not because she believes that every reader is as accomplished as the critics, but because she considers it an ineffective rhetorical strategy. When Oliphant defined the faculties necessary to the critic, she also included “intellectual modesty.”<sup>27</sup> This is precisely what Arnold lacks, in her estimation. Because Oliphant understands the critic’s duty in social terms, her harshest criticism of Arnold—and arguably, the most insightful—comes when she turns her attention to the same social ills Arnold seeks to critique. Reviewing his satirical work, *Friendship’s Garland* (1871), she argues that Arnold’s criticism of the “changes English sentiment has undergone” is apt, but that his method merely contributes to the problem:

[O]f all things in the world that the British public want, we believe there is nothing half so important as sound and unexaggerated public criticism. And here is what we get for it. Mr. Matthew Arnold astride upon his British Philistine, whipping and spurring over hedges and ditches—alas! as Philistinish, as intent upon his own beautiful qualities, as deliciously unconscious of his weakness, as his steed.<sup>28</sup>

Oliphant suggests that Arnold’s vanity is the ultimate goal, not real social change, for if he wanted to make a difference surely he would take some pains to ensure that his message reached the appropriate audience. Instead, she argues, “Our satirist stands and mocks at the pit in a highly-refined small voice which never reaches beyond the orchestra-stalls.”<sup>29</sup> This is a criticism she might as easily have leveled at the satirists of penny journals who, as we shall see,

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27. Oliphant, “New Books” (April 1871), 440.

28. *Ibid.*, 459-60.

29. *Ibid.*, 459.

went to so much trouble to laugh at “their neighbors” without effecting any change for the better.

### “Reading for the Million”

Margaret Oliphant’s abiding concern for audience is partly the result of the mid-century milieu in which she began her writing career. Oliphant’s first article for *Blackwood’s* in 1854 coincides with a tipping point in the history of publishing. By the 1850s, British literature and its reading public had expanded to unprecedented numbers thanks to literacy initiatives and innovations such as the steam press, cheap paper, and the new market of railway literature. In short, there were larger and more varied audiences than ever before. While Oliphant’s sense of the critic as guide was typical of mid-century reviewing, the type of guidance she offered was not. If, as Woolford has argued, mid-century reviewers were firmly on the side of the reader, it seems more accurate to say that they were on the side of *their* readers, as many critics profited from and made sport of separating good readers from bad. The explosion of cheap literature prompted a new wave of anxiety about mass reading, perhaps most humorously exemplified by the many surveys of cheap literature that appeared in middle-class magazines. In 1838, William Thackeray set the tone with “Half-a-Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge,” which caustically surveyed fifteen penny periodicals as the literature of “the world impolite” for *Fraser’s Magazine*.<sup>30</sup> Twenty years later, Thackeray’s

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30. Thackeray, “Half-a-Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge,” 280. Of course, anti-reader sentiment does not begin here. Richard Altick discusses the “emergence of the reading

influence is evident in Wilkie Collins's exploration of "The Unknown Public" for *Household Words* and Margaret Oliphant's survey of penny journals for *Blackwood's*, "The Byways of Literature—Reading for the Million," both of which appeared in August 1858. But a comparison of Oliphant's essay with the rest of the genre reveals her very different motives. Oliphant's foray into the byways of literature lays out her rhetorical approach to literature and, what's more, goes a long way in contradicting the charge that she pandered to readers.

What distinguishes Oliphant's essay from Collins's, as well as the steady stream of condescending or indignant articles about working-class reading that appeared throughout the nineteenth century, is that Oliphant's survey does not seek to mock, condemn, or reform the readers of penny journals. Instead, she uses the opportunity to highlight the different social uses of literature for its various audiences. Oliphant surveys eight penny journals, all of which would have been printed on cheap paper and included fiction, miscellaneous short pieces, answers to correspondents, and often a woodcut illustration.<sup>31</sup> As she introduces this sub-genre of the periodical, Oliphant effectively dismisses any monolithic notion of literature held by her readers:

Let us not delude ourselves with the idea that literature is fully represented by that small central body of its forces of whom everybody knows every

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public as a social problem" in the late-eighteenth-century and the subsequent onslaught of anti-fiction and anti-literacy essays. *The English Common Reader*, 65.

31. Oliphant's survey includes *Cassell's Illustrated Paper*; *The London Journal*; *Reynold's Miscellany*; *Home Magazine*; *Family Herald*; *Welcome Guest*; *The Public Instructor*; *Literary Review*; and *Household Oracle*; and *Reasoner*.

individual name. Nay, not everybody—only everybody who is anybody—not the everybody who reads the *London Journal* and the *Family Herald*.<sup>32</sup>

Though she frankly acknowledges the existence of different audiences and the consequent need for different genres, she does not flatter her readers' superiority by condemning the penny public. Instead, she warns against the condescension such articles typically engender by describing the penny public as "a varied and fluctuating mass, as uncertain and changeable as any other class of the community...acting with the same fickleness, short-sightedness, and inconsistency which rule over everybody else." She concludes this equalizing move by warning, "They are not to be kept in perpetual lecturedom any more than we are."<sup>33</sup>

Oliphant's concessions seem even more open-minded when we consider them in the context of other middle-class commentaries on the penny public. Most journalists who wrote about the penny public were indeed pandering to their readers. They wrote for the amusement of their leisured audience, and to that end they present the penny public as exotic, dangerous, and inferior. A typical rhetorical device figures the essay as an expedition into an unknown land. Thackeray writes, "An English gentleman knows as much about the people of Lapland or California as he does about the aborigines of The Seven Dials or the natives of Wapping."<sup>34</sup> Because such neighborhoods represent a frightening and dangerous "incognita terra," Thackeray assures those "who are yet unwilling to brave the dangers which must be encountered in the search" that "there can scarcely be a better method of acquiring science

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32. Oliphant, "The Byways of Literature," 203.

33. Ibid., 214.

34. Thackeray, "Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge," 280.

than by such books as the fifteen penny publications” he has collected.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Wilkie Collins comes across as the proprietor of a freak show in his treatment of “The Unknown Public,” promising a glimpse of “the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel Journals,” a “reading public...out of the pale of literary civilization...a mystery which the sharpest man among us may not find easy to solve.”<sup>36</sup> His “specimens” are literally unbound, and his frequent reference to this fact implies a metaphorical looseness that invites us to view these publications as untamed or wild. In this same vein, surveyors tend to mock penny papers for their errors in language or lack of social sophistication. For example, Collins repeatedly quotes the merchant who sells him these “good pennorths,” and devotes several pages to elaborating the absurdity of the “Letters To Correspondents.”<sup>37</sup> He affects astonishment—though his delight is apparent—as he reports, “Inconceivably dense ignorance, inconceivably petty malice, and inconceivably complacent vanity, all consult the editor, and all, wonderful to relate, get serious answers from him.”<sup>38</sup> He even compiles a list of “ten editorial sentiments” as examples of these “serious” answers.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Thackeray includes extracts from the penny papers and, for the pleasure of his sophisticated audience, italicizes “one or two of the most pleasing phrases, or turns of expression, which have struck us in the

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35. Ibid., 280.

36. Collins, “The Unknown Public,” 217-18.

37. Ibid., 218.

38. Ibid., 219.

39. Ibid., 220.

perusal.<sup>40</sup> The overall effect of these rhetorical devices is to affirm their middle-class reader's feeling of superiority.

In "The Byways of Literature," Oliphant examines some of these same aspects of the penny periodicals—their improbable fiction, their focus on quantity over quality, their readers' lack of sophistication as evidenced by letters to the editor. And she uses a few of Thackeray's tricks, too—referring to "primitive minds" and "the geography of that strange region where such [literature]...can grow and flourish"—so that a superficial reading might not differentiate her from the typical satirist.<sup>41</sup> But unlike Collins, who laments the Unknown Public's inability to discriminate, Oliphant tries to account for their preferences by analyzing their socioeconomic conditions. She explains,

people in whose understanding poverty does not mean a smaller house, or fewer servants, or a difficulty about one's butcher bill, but means real hunger, cold, and nakedness, are not people to be amused with abstractions.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, she approaches her eight penny magazines in the manner of a sociologist rather than an imperialist adventurer. She describes the artifacts to her readers and, based on what

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40. Thackeray, "Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge," 287.

41. Oliphant, "The Byways of Literature," 204. Mary Poovey misreads Oliphant's tone, arguing that "Oliphant bemoaned the taste of the growing public of readers as she surveyed with some bewilderment the 'undiscriminated multitudes' of popular serial publications." "Forgotten Writers, Neglected Histories," 439. In fact, Oliphant refers to the "undiscriminated multitudes" of readers, not publications, and her point is that the upper classes have misjudged the tastes and conditions of these readers. While Oliphant does initially adopt a weary tone, she does so to satirize the hypocritical notion that the working classes should only have the "useful" literature provided by the Societies for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. The joke becomes clear when she refers to "the chill of disappointed expectation consequent upon the discovery" that "the multitude, like ourselves, loved amusement better than instruction." "The Byways of Literature," 203.

42. Oliphant, "The Byways of Literature," 205.

she sees, begins to infer the audience's education, daily life, and values. Collins ostensibly does the same, but his witty essay never seriously considers the penny audience or why they read what they read. His merciless list of the penny public's "incredibly absurd" questions is designed to lead his audience to smug and unkind conclusions.<sup>43</sup> Collins essentially accuses the Unknown Public of stubborn backwardness, flippantly concluding that "The largest audience for periodical literature, in this age of periodicals, must obey the universal law of progress, and must, sooner or later, learn to discriminate."<sup>44</sup> Further, his dismissal of the penny public clearly indicates that he considers literature to be the sole property of that "small central body" that Oliphant argues is only one interpretive community. This may be because, as Lorna Huett argues, Collins's real purpose in "The Unknown Public" is to differentiate the typical penny-journal audience from his own readers who pay just tuppence for *Household Words*.<sup>45</sup> By mocking the penny public's inability to discriminate between a good and bad book, Collins implicitly congratulates his own audience on their refined tastes. Indeed, the underlying message is that penny readers could be reading *Household Words* except that they are too stupid to appreciate good literature.

Certainly Oliphant could afford to be more generous in her assessment of the working classes because her readers, who paid 2s. 6d. for a single issue of *Blackwood's*, were in no

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43. Collins, "The Unknown Public," 220.

44. *Ibid.*, 222.

45. Huett, "Among the Unknown Public," 64.

danger of confusing themselves with the penny public.<sup>46</sup> This sense of security is reflected in Oliphant's choice of setting for her article. Unlike Thackeray and Collins, who venture into unseemly neighborhoods to purchase their penny magazines, Oliphant conducts her survey in the sheltered space of a cathedral close, in the shadow of the cathedral's "patriarchal presence" and the "quiet, high, old brick houses...too wealthy and sunny and warm for the wintriest December to chill."<sup>47</sup> Oliphant's decision to conduct her review from such a rarefied setting displays her awareness that she occupies a privileged position.<sup>48</sup> Given this context, we must credit Oliphant for her attempt to consider sympathetically the purpose penny fiction serves for its audience rather than chastise such readers for failing to gain admittance to her conservatory.

Oliphant demonstrates the social factors that impede the "progress" Collins disingenuously demands. She theorizes that the hard living conditions of the working class shape their tastes for escapist, narrative-driven stories, and concludes that their literary interests are therefore only as likely to progress as their socioeconomic conditions. She states, "Whether the existing literature of the multitude is improbable, we will not take upon us to say; but certainly no one ever will improve it efficiently without taking into full account all the

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46. Ellegård, 18. Ellegård lists the price for 1860 and 1865.

47. Oliphant, "The Byways of Literature," 200.

48. It also alludes to *Blackwood's* characteristically conservative politics. *Blackwood's* had a long reputation for abusing the lower classes, from Lockhart's scathing attacks on Leigh Hunt, John Keats, and the "Cockney School of Poetry" in 1818 to its more recent opposition to the First Reform Bill.

class-characteristics which have helped it into being.”<sup>49</sup> This shrewd assessment is supported by Richard Altick’s description of the mid-Victorian work week, where “Those in even the most favored trades came home no earlier than six or seven o’clock, and after the evening meal only an hour or two remained until fatigue and the prospect of rising before dawn the next day drove them to bed.”<sup>50</sup> Oliphant argues that working-class readers’ taste in literature is shaped by their environment. They read what they can afford to buy and what they can squeeze into their limited leisure time.

I have suggested that Oliphant approaches her subject as a sociologist might, and in many ways, Oliphant’s assessment resembles Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of literary taste. In his study of nineteenth-century French culture, Bourdieu argues that the discourse of taste elides its social and material underpinnings. By assuming that taste is natural or inherent, such discourse pretends that environment and financial privilege have nothing to do with one’s preferences. But in fact, elite taste is a function of material privilege—what he calls cultural capital. He explains, “The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that... it *naturalizes* real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of

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49. Oliphant, “The Byways of Literature,” 215.

50. Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 87. Altick also supports Oliphant’s suggestion that, contrary to alarmist rhetoric, penny fiction might in fact soothe working-class readers rather than incite them to revolt. Altick explains: “Though in the first half of the century there was a deep (and not wholly idle) apprehension that making the ‘lower ranks’ of society literate would breed all sorts of disorder and debauchery, in the long run the proliferation of reading matter proved to have been the oil that was needed to quiet the troubled waters. If the common man did not necessarily become wiser after he had an abundant supply of printed matter at his command, he was certainly kept amused. The comparative tranquillity of Victorian society after mid-century was due in no small part to the growth of the popular press.” *Ibid.*, 5.

culture into differences of nature.”<sup>51</sup> Bourdieu argues that taste “unites and separates” people according to their economic opportunities, so that “tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance...of the tastes of others.”<sup>52</sup> We see this clearly when Thackeray and Collins mock the readers of cheap fiction; by aiming their satire at the literary taste of the masses, they are able to credibly scorn the poor. Oliphant, however, tries to denaturalize aesthetic preferences by revealing the socioeconomic factors that influence them. Although Oliphant is not asking for “progress”—that is, change in the social hierarchy or literary taste—any more than Thackeray or Collins, she is far more honest about her position in this system. She accepts the hierarchy of readers, but by frankly acknowledging the relativity of aesthetic standards she also seeks to raise her readers’ critical awareness of their own reading practices.<sup>53</sup>

### **Morals and the Middle Class**

Although Oliphant’s audience would not have felt the same anxieties as Collins’s, “The Byways of Literature” is as much about middle-class taste as it is about working-class reading

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51. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 68.

52. *Ibid.*, 56.

53. This is not so different from her views on gender roles. Elisabeth Jay has pointed out that while Oliphant held fairly conservative views about women’s roles, she did not base them on a belief in women’s naturally inferior abilities. She saw it as noble and morally good for women to occupy the submissive role, but she believed they chose it. And she also held men to the standard of making it possible for women to fulfill their role. She acknowledges that it is a performance, but she sees the performance as socially useful.

practices.<sup>54</sup> Oliphant points to the surprising contrast that while working-class readers enjoy improbable stories of wealthy lords and ladies, her privileged audience prefers realistic novels about working-class characters like *Mary Barton* and *Alton Locke*. As I've already noted, she accounts for these generic differences by referring to sociological factors. She explains to her middle- to upper-class *Blackwood's* audience: "Our leisure accordingly plays with all fancies, all inventions—all matters of thought and reason; whereas their leisure, brief and rapid, and sharpened with the day's fatigue, loves, above all things, a story."<sup>55</sup> Far from disapproving of the penny journals, Oliphant believes that they meet the needs of an audience that reads for romance, rather than reality. Of course, she still underestimates working-class readers. Jonathan Rose demonstrates in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* that working-class readers often read widely and ambitiously for self-improvement.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, both Oliphant and Collins misread the audience of their penny papers. What they failed to understand—or chose to ignore for the sake of convenience—was that the audience for most of these magazines was not actually the masses, but those between the working and middle class. As Sally Mitchell has noted in her study of *The London Journal* and

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54. Dallas Liddle has argued that even before 1855 the elite had ceased to worry about the revolutionary potential of cheap periodicals available to the masses, so we might characterize Collins's "Unknown Public" and Oliphant's "millions" as a class-identity threat rather than a political threat. Certainly, the continuing attention to these "other" readers is an act of self-definition. "Salesmen, Sportsmen, Mentors," 38.

55. Oliphant, "The Byways of Literature," 205.

56. Rose's data suggests that working-class readers were hungry for books and read what they could. Their piecemeal reading was out of necessity. Rose describes the "mongrel library" such readers assembled for themselves.

the *Family Herald*, the letters to the correspondence column (which often ask questions about handwriting, pronunciation, etiquette, and courtship) and the fairly tame editorial content of these journals bespeak the readers' conscious class mobility.<sup>57</sup> It's no wonder that Oliphant found nothing harmful in her batch of pennyworths, for magazines like *The Family Herald* understood the social ambitions of those readers and assumed the shopkeeper's daughter held the same morals as the higher class.<sup>58</sup> These factors reveal that Oliphant also uses the "reading for the million" as a convenient foil to raise her middle-class audience's consciousness of their own reading practices.

In "The Byways of Literature," Oliphant speaks for middle-class taste when she asserts that what brings fiction "close to the heart" is that it "expounds what that heart itself feels without being able to express."<sup>59</sup> And throughout her career, she adheres to this principle that her readers want realistic characters with whom they can identify. In 1854, she explains that

the man or the woman who expresses for us thoughts which we recognise at once as long entertained but unexpressed, and represents for us those true moods and states of mind which we can feel, but cannot represent, weaves a warm link between us, as of those who have looked into each other, heart to heart....<sup>60</sup>

She expresses the same standard when she dismisses *The Scarlet Letter* because "we cannot take such productions into our heart" and praises Anne Thackeray's *Story of Elizabeth* for "that

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57. Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, 2-3.

58. *Ibid.*, 7.

59. Oliphant, "The Byways of Literature," 207.

60. Oliphant, "Mary Russell Mitford," 664.

power which can reveal the secrets of human character or the problems of human life.”<sup>61</sup> But if Oliphant identifies the power of sympathy in her *Blackwood's* audience as a mark of greater sophistication, she also sees it as a source of danger. Oliphant often worried that sympathetic readers might lack the ability to distance themselves from what they read. Put simply, readers who take fiction “close to the heart” have to be careful about which fictions they read. For example, Oliphant describes the narrative force of *Jane Eyre* as “a motion which is irresistible. We are swept on in the current, and never draw breath till the tale is ended. Afterwards we may disapprove at our leisure, but it is certain that we have not a moment's pause to be critical till we come to the end.”<sup>62</sup> It follows, for Oliphant, that a text that will be taken “close to the heart” has a social responsibility to its reader.

Oliphant's reflections on the moral effects of fiction have been an obstacle for many twentieth-century scholars, particularly when it comes to her reviews of the sensation genre. Oliphant first addressed “Sensation Novels” in the May 1862 issue of *Blackwood's*, and she took up the subject again in her review of “Novels” for September 1867. In the later (and more often quoted) review, Oliphant objects to the the lurid—and, to her thinking, false—portrait of Englishwomen offered by female sensation novelists like Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda

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61. Oliphant, “Modern Novelists Great and Small,” 563; “Novels” (August 1863), 183. Similarly, Solveig Robinson has shown that “This emphasis on feeling—the insistence on the reader's need to identify with at least one of the characters in a work—links Oliphant's nonfiction and fiction reviews.” In the case of biography, Oliphant would not be satisfied with “a mere record of facts.” And as late as her “Old Saloon” series of the 1880s, “Oliphant consistently claimed that fiction was able to exert a beneficial effect on readers, because it enabled them to get outside their own minds and experiences and to enter sympathetically into those of others.” Robinson, “Expanding a ‘Limited Orbit,’” 208.

62. Oliphant, “Modern Novelists Great and Small,” 559.

Broughton. Worried that readers will be fooled into accepting these morally equivocal heroines as true, Oliphant pronounces, “It is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them.”<sup>63</sup> Her condemnation of Mary Braddon and Rhoda Broughton not only looks prudish but also makes Oliphant seem complicit with the oppressive gender ideology that sought to control women’s reading. But when we read Oliphant’s two reviews of sensation in the context of the reader-centered critical method she used in “The Byways of Literature,” we see that there is more to her argument.

It might seem contradictory that Oliphant finds nothing harmful in the sensational and improbable fiction of penny papers like the *London Journal* in 1858, yet wholeheartedly condemns the sensation fiction of Mary Braddon and Rhoda Broughton as “disgusting” in 1867, but this point offers the key to Oliphant’s reader-centered critical theory.<sup>64</sup> The difference in these two cases is one of audience. Braddon’s and Broughton’s novels did not appear in penny journals for the amusement of working-class readers, but rather addressed themselves in family magazines and three-volume format to a middle-class audience accustomed to taking fiction “close to the heart.” We find a more nuanced explanation in Oliphant’s earlier review of sensation. When she reviewed “Sensation Novels” for *Blackwood’s* in 1862, her judgment of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* was approving, though

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63. Oliphant, “Novels” (September 1867), 275.

64. *Ibid.*, 260.

cautiously so. She begins by praising Collins for creating sensational effects without recourse to unrealistic machinery: “His effects are produced by common human acts performed by recognisable human agents, whose motives are never inscrutable, and whose line of conduct is always more or less consistent.”<sup>65</sup> Oliphant recognized technical accomplishment, but like many of her contemporaries, she believed that the highest artistic achievement was inseparable from its moral purpose. For her the fault in most sensation novels is to “make the worse appear the better cause.”<sup>66</sup> Regarding *The Woman in White*, she worries that “the sympathies of the reader...are, it is impossible to deny, devoted to the arch-villain of the story.”<sup>67</sup> The villain Fosco “is not detestable; on the contrary, he is more interesting, and seizes on our sympathies more warmly than any other character in the book. This, in the interests of art, it is necessary to protest against.”<sup>68</sup> In short, she didn’t see any danger to a penny public that expects fantastic tales, but she thought *Blackwood’s* audience might be vulnerable due to its sympathetic reading practices.

This review also shows us that Oliphant’s anxieties about sensation fiction are not the typical conservative attempt to reform or control women’s reading. Whereas many critics targeted women readers as naturally susceptible to the influences of fiction, Oliphant’s position is founded on her understanding of the sympathetic reading practices that (she

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65. Oliphant, “Sensation Novels,” 566.

66. Ibid., 567.

67. Ibid., 566.

68. Ibid., 567.

believes) already exist among her readers, and she sees this weakness as a function of class rather than gender. She describes middle-class men and women as sympathetic, and therefore susceptible, readers. And while this characterization of her audience might not seem to connote respect for the reader's critical abilities, Oliphant held her readers to a very high standard of critical skill. Indeed, her particularly venomous ire in these reviews is provoked by so many readers' failure to forecast these dangers for themselves—or, in Arnold's terminology, to exercise a literary conscience. She writes,

...the mere fact that such ravings are found in print might be no great argument against the purity of the age. But when it is added that the class thus represented does not disown the picture—that, on the contrary, it hangs it up in boudoir and drawing-room—that the books which contain it circulate everywhere, and are read everywhere, and are not contradicted—then the case becomes much more serious.<sup>69</sup>

Noting that English fiction has held a reputation “for a certain sanity, wholesomeness, and cleanliness,” Oliphant suggests that “this peculiarity has had its effect, no doubt, upon those very qualities of the national mind which produced it.”<sup>70</sup> Because she recognizes a circular relationship in which fiction both shapes and is shaped by the larger society, she reminds her readers that in accepting these fictions, “the feminine half of society thus stigmatises and stultifies its own existence.”<sup>71</sup> But when she points out her audience's vulnerability to being shaped by these pictures, she does not see it as inevitable that they should succumb. In fact, she is stunned by the popularity of such novels: “The perplexing fact is, that the subjects of

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69. Oliphant, “Novels” (September 1867), 259.

70. *Ibid.*, 257.

71. *Ibid.*, 260.

this slander make no objection to it.”<sup>72</sup> And she might well expect her audience to understand their own sympathetic reading practices and police themselves, for that is what her criticism consistently modeled.

### **Pleasing the Flock**

We have seen how Margaret Oliphant’s attention to readers led to her criticism of sensation fiction, so it is also useful to consider how it displays itself in her own so-called sensation novel, *Salem Chapel* (1863). This novel’s exploration of the relationship between preacher and congregation provides a useful metaphor for the critic-reader dilemma. It also helps us better understand the rhetorical foundations of Oliphant’s response to the penny public, sensation fiction, and Arnold’s criticism. The main character, young dissenting minister Arthur Vincent, arrives at Salem Chapel with visions of ecclesiastical glory, which he believes to be imminent through the influence of his preaching, and is thus completely unprepared for the realities of his post. His flock expects him to preside over tea meetings, marry a young woman of the congregation and settle down, and generally “make hisself agreeable.”<sup>73</sup> Such concerns are beneath Vincent, however. He believes his business is saving souls, while the flock thinks he should be pleasing them. The central question of this novel is

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72. Ibid.

73. Oliphant, *Salem Chapel*, 87.

whether the preacher can perform his duty to God if his deacons are in fact his masters—the people of Salem pay his salary, after all.<sup>74</sup>

Because Arthur Vincent's position is analogous to that of the critic who assumes the role of "priest," *Salem Chapel* seems to me another critique of elitist criticism. Oliphant undercuts any temptation to sympathize with Vincent's feeling of wasted intellectual effort by highlighting his condescending behavior. Vincent is an intellectual but, more to the point, he seems anxious that others should know it. He writes sermons that his flock can barely understand and that, according to the narrator, Vincent knows to be high-flown shams. Though Vincent believes that what he wants is to help improve his congregation, the observable truth is that he is disgusted by their low manners and is intent on drawing a distinction between himself and them. Indeed, the haughty minister needs this congregation to reinforce his own sense of superiority because, despite all his finicky manners, Vincent is an outsider himself. He may long to join the high society of Grange Lane, but he makes an awkward addition to Lady Western's garden parties where no one wishes to linger with the dissenting minister.<sup>75</sup> As the story unfolds, Vincent feels that he must choose between

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74. She writes in *Salem Chapel*: "The glory of the English parson is that his position is ensured to him whether he satisfies those whom he is called upon to serve, or whether he does not satisfy them." *Ibid.*, 251. Oliphant's point, I think, is that the journalist is more like a Dissenter than a priest, because he has no sinecure. He must consider the audience. She also taps into a difficulty in professionalizing journalists, for like Dissenting ministers, they were not necessarily gentlemen and they depended upon the flock for their pay.

75. In real life, Oliphant found the opposite to be true of Arnold. According to Jay, "She found the male arrogance emanating from Matthew Arnold's prose essays intolerable, but found, when she sat next to him at the Lord Mayor's dinner in 1874, 'that she liked him better in his own person than in his books.'" *Mrs Oliphant, "A Fiction to Herself"*, 36.

fulfilling his religious vocation and pleasing his congregation. But the reader is invited to question the dilemma—indeed, he might very well do both, but not without sacrificing his inflated idea of himself. Interestingly, the conclusion of the novel sees Vincent abandon his clerical post in favor of a more congenial pulpit: journalism. It's hard to say whether Vincent has found a better place where he can really do good, or whether he's simply found a place that will put up with his elitist ways. What's certain is that he's still at the mercy of a paying public. Indeed, I'm tempted to say that the joke is on Vincent, for Oliphant knew all too well the necessity of pleasing the periodical's audience. And this reading is all the more persuasive when we recall that, in her review of *Friendship's Garland*, Oliphant cast Arnold in the role of a disconnected preacher who “does not seem to take into consideration the important, and we should say essential, matter of reaching the special audience to which he preaches.”<sup>76</sup>

As I have mentioned previously, several critics have noted sensational elements in this novel. Oliphant's narrative begins as a realistic novel, then gives way to a sensation plot—complete with bigamy, murder, newspaper headlines, brain fever, and a highly dramatic and irregular psychological cure—before ultimately concluding like any other clerical fiction. The sensational subplot has annoyed critics like Elisabeth Jay, who asserts that it “sits ill at ease with the comic realism with which the Dissenting milieu of its setting is depicted.”<sup>77</sup> Others who embrace the sensation plot as a feminist narrative tend to do so at the expense of Vincent's story line, promoting one or more of the female characters to the role of

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76. Oliphant, “New Books” (April 1871), 458.

77. Jay, *Mrs Oliphant, “A Fiction to Herself”*, 5.

protagonist.<sup>78</sup> Another interesting difficulty arises from the fact that Oliphant's 1862 review of "Sensation Novels" ran alongside the serialization of *Salem Chapel* in *Blackwood's*, and no critic has satisfactorily resolved the novel with the criticism. But if we take Vincent as an example of the elitist critic who disdains his audience, the sensational elements of the novel become less confusing and, what's more, *Salem Chapel* dovetails coherently with Oliphant's essay on "Sensation Novels." Rather than consider the sensation story a flaw, I contend that the novel's split personality reflects the dilemma faced by its hero. Throughout the novel, Vincent struggles with the call to please and, often conversely, to instruct his audience. We might say that the narrative formally duplicates Vincent's ambivalence about his relation to his audience. This ambivalence echoes the central theme of Oliphant's 1862 review of "Sensation Novels," which is concerned with the moral consequences of the pleasure afforded by novels like *The Woman in White*. As a critic and a novelist, Oliphant stands in Vincent's shoes: she must choose between pleasing *Blackwood's* readers and performing her moral duty.

But besides mirroring Vincent's dilemma, the sensation plot of *Salem Chapel* also serves as his penance. What better punishment for the snobby preacher—whose only wish is to separate himself from the vulgar population of Salem Chapel—than to plunge him into the even more lurid and vulgar sensation plot? The "sensational" middle of the narrative takes Vincent down a peg and forces him to confront his own class anxieties. While the clergyman has some high-minded religious ideas about his duty, he also desires recognition and, more specifically, acceptance into high society. Early on, he dreams of extending his influence

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78. For example, Shirley Jones reads the sensation plot as a commentary on motherhood and Tamar Heller focuses on women's sexuality.

beyond Salem and winning over the souls of Carlingford, including the beautiful and wealthy young widow, Lady Western. Oliphant uses the sensation plot and the misguided flirtation with Lady Western to undo Vincent's feigned superiority. Oliphant humiliates her fictional character in a way that is strikingly similar to her later treatment of real-life critics like Arnold. Indeed, we hear echoes of *Salem Chapel* in Oliphant's review of *Friendship's Garland* when she quips:

His discussion of the shortcomings of the British Philistine, which are uttered in a voice much too finely pitched ever to reach that culprit's veritable ear, remind us somewhat of the awakening sermons aimed at brutal vice which evangelical clergymen often thunder at a meek score of innocent women, guilty of no enormity greater than a bit of scandal.<sup>79</sup>

If we read *Salem Chapel* as a commentary on the hero as man of letters, Oliphant seems determined to remind critics like Matthew Arnold that, like any other ideal, culture must reach an audience in order to flourish.

By analyzing Margaret Oliphant's early treatment of the penny public, her response to sensation fiction, and her critique of Arnold's criticism, I have tried to demonstrate the value of her reader-centered criticism in its own right and as an integral part of Victorian literary criticism. Her 1858 defense of the penny public showed her readers that taste is intimately connected with class, and that audience determines genre. That early essay might serve just as well as a rejoinder to Arnold's complaints about middle-class readers. When she proclaims that the penny public doesn't want to be lectured to, she's referring to the didactic fiction distributed by the Societies for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, but there's also a prescient

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79. Oliphant, "New Books" (April 1871), 458.

warning for her middle-class audience here. As the century wore on, her readers would find that the shoe was now on the other foot, as critical debates increasingly focused on the reading habits of the “Philistines.” For all its explicitly good intentions of bringing culture to everyone, Arnold’s ideal critic is an elitist who knows more than his readers and needs to show it. Arnold proclaimed that the aims of culture should extend to all classes but, rather than rising above rank, his theory spoke to a very narrow section of society.

As the field of criticism became increasingly professionalized, the question of aesthetic taste had little to do with what the reader might already know.<sup>80</sup> While John Woolford sees a definitive turn against readers in the early 1860s, Mary Poovey puts the date a bit later still, in the 1880s, noting the very short but significant step from Margaret Oliphant’s theory that a work should produce harmony in the reader to Henry James’s theory that a work should be harmonious in itself. Echoing Woolford, Poovey argues that James’s obliteration of the reader from the meaning-making process defines him as an expert (for if the meaning is in the work itself, it takes a specialist to find it). Wherever we locate the beginning of this trend, by the 1930s the New Criticism had defined the academic discipline of English literature by its rigorous subjugation of readers to the text. If Matthew Arnold convinced critics in the second half of the nineteenth century to switch from the reader’s side to the author’s side, the New

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80. Of course, the distrust of readers was nothing new. Altick has traced the evolution of an anti-reader sentiment during the late eighteenth century, and we have seen the animus behind Thackeray’s 1838 satire of those who read cheap fiction. And attacks on readers in the early nineteenth century were by no means confined to the “lower orders.” In 1824, James Mill argued that the press—including expensive magazines like the *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review*—cannot be critical because its existence depends upon success with readers and, “To please the great body of men...he must flatter their prejudices.” “Periodical Literature,” 207.

Critics went one step farther and shifted their allegiance from the author to the text. But at the heart of both Arnold's critical theories and the New Criticism of the 1930s are the claims of an elite professional class—not the masses of readers and not “amateur” reviewers. Thus, we can see the tide turning against amateur readers and women critics alike.

I have been less interested in portraying Oliphant as a victim of this process than in demonstrating her active efforts to undermine it. But certainly, her reader-centered approach drew the contempt of contemporaries like James and Hardy who cultivated “artistic,” professional reputations. More importantly, Oliphant's and Arnold's vastly different reputations within twentieth-century literary studies have been determined by their fundamentally different attitudes toward the reader. The twentieth-century canonization of Matthew Arnold as *the* man who introduced critical standards into Victorian literary discourse has obscured the advantages and even the existence of the reader-centered critical practice of Oliphant and many others. Though Arnold is credited for his ideals of culture, this is not the sole or perhaps even the primary reason for his canonical status. Arnold's emphasis on distance as key to the critic's professional authority provides a useful lineage for the academic criticism that emerged at the turn of the century. On the other hand, Oliphant's interest in the general reader can make her seem amateurish and, worse, commercial. I think we do a disservice to a great many nineteenth-century reviewers, both male and female, if we accept the notion that their critical attention to audience was simply commercial. Furthermore, if we really value Matthew Arnold's cultural ideals, then we must acknowledge that Oliphant's criticism seems better fitted to achieve those goals. Her emphasis on context invites the reader to approach texts with a critical attitude. Her discussions of “the sliding-

scale of fame” and “the byways of literature” demystified the connection between taste and social status and gave readers the tools to think critically about their own preferences. By emphasizing the different needs of different audiences, Oliphant’s criticism promotes a greater respect for the common reader, as well as the authority of the non-specialist—and often female—critic, at a time when critical discourse was heading in quite the opposite direction.

### Chapter 3

#### Sympathetic Criticism: Anne Mozley, Gender, and Genre

Victorian gender ideology assumed that “women’s strengths were emotional rather than logical, sympathetic and domestic rather than rational and worldly.”<sup>1</sup> This ideology not only limited women to the domestic sphere and left men to govern the public sphere, but also divided literature into feminine and masculine genres. This gendered theory of genres is nowhere more visible than in the critical discourse about “lady novelists.” As an increasing number of women began publishing novels, reviewers tended to explain their accomplishments as the natural outpouring of feminine emotion. George Henry Lewes’s 1852 essay on “The Lady Novelists” for the *Westminster Review* propounds the generally accepted stereotypes of men’s and women’s capabilities when he asserts that “the Masculine mind is characterized by the predominance of the intellect, and the Feminine by the predominance of the emotions.”<sup>2</sup> Although Lewes purports to defend women novelists from those who resent their forays into the world of letters, his praise is somewhat backhanded. In order to justify woman’s natural fitness for writing fiction, he limits her accomplishment to matters of sentiment:

The domestic experiences which form the bulk of woman’s knowledge find an appropriate form in novels; while the very nature of fiction calls for that predominance of sentiment which we have already attributed to the feminine mind. ...Hence we may be prepared to find women succeeding better in finesse

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1. Gilmour, *The Victorian Period*, 191.

2. Lewes, “The Lady Novelists,” 72.

of detail, in pathos and sentiment, while men generally succeed better in the construction of plots and the delineation of character.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, J.M. Ludlow's 1853 review of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* insists on a clear distinction between feminine sympathy or feeling on the one hand and masculine taste, judgment, and reason on the other. He writes,

Now, if we consider the novel to be the picture of human life in a pathetic, or as some might prefer the expression, in a sympathetic form, that is to say, addressed to human feeling, rather than to human taste, judgment, or reason, there seems nothing paradoxical in the view, that women are called to the mastery of this peculiar field of literature. We know, all of us, that if the man is the head of humanity, woman is its heart; and as soon as education has rendered her ordinarily capable of expressing feeling in written words, why should we be surprised to find that her words come more home to us than those of men, where feeling is chiefly concerned?<sup>4</sup>

Others have noted how damning this praise could be. Elaine Showalter argues that “Such an approach was particularly attractive because it implied that women’s writing was as artless and effortless as birdsong, and therefore not in competition with the more rational male eloquence.”<sup>5</sup> So while the novel was feminized, subjects like history, politics, science, criticism—indeed, the field of “letters” generally—were coded as masculine and, therefore, supposed to be off-limits to the increasing number of women authors.

Anne Mozley's 1859 review of *Adam Bede* puts this gendered theory of genre to different use. The identity of George Eliot was still a secret at this point, and while there was much speculation about who the author might be, Mozley was the first reviewer to suspect a

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3. Ibid.

4. Ludlow, “Ruth,” 168.

5. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 82.

woman behind the pseudonym.<sup>6</sup> In explaining her assertion, Mozley seems at first to adhere to the views expressed by Lewes and Ludlow. She declares that “there are subjects and passions which will always continue man’s inalienable field of inquiry; but on this region we do not think the author of ‘Adam Bede’ trenches” because in *Adam Bede*

the knowledge of female nature is feminine, not only in its details...but in its whole tone of feeling; that so is the full, close scrutiny of observation exercised in scanning every feature of a bounded field of inquiry; ...that the position of the writer towards every point in discussion is a woman’s position, that is, from a stand of observation rather than more active participation.<sup>7</sup>

But even as Mozley overtly affirms the separation of genres along gendered lines, her review continually blurs this distinction. For example, her description of George Eliot’s narrative style as a “system of tracing effects to their causes” wanders into the distinctly “masculine” territory of analysis and rationality. She asserts that “whatever views this writer expresses, they are clearly arrived at by a process of thought; the weight of calm conviction gives value to every sentiment whether we agree or not.”<sup>8</sup> Even more interesting, Mozley suggests that such analytical thought underlies the (supposedly feminine) faculty of sympathy. Focusing on Eliot’s portrayal of Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel’s “fall,” Mozley explains:

[W]e follow their turns of thought, we see the desires that most actuate them.... In every crisis [Eliot] gives us the gradual growth of a thought, or impulse, from its first unconscious stirring in the kindred nature to its maturity in speech and action. This habit, no doubt, conduces to charity: a deed done, or even a word spoken, is an act over which we can sit in judgment; but how that word came to be spoken, the temptation which led to it, the human nature

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6. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Mozley, Anne (1809-1891),” by Ellen Jordan.

7. Mozley, “*Adam Bede* and Recent Novels,” 437.

8. *Ibid.*, 435.

which yielded—there is quite sure to be something in the process with which we can sympathize.<sup>9</sup>

Mozley's explanation of sympathy as an analytical process complicates Ludlow's binaries of feminine/masculine and heart/head. Indeed, by equating sympathy with critical analysis, Mozley co-opts the gender ideology that defines feeling as feminine and uses it to authorize women's critical authority.

This chapter explores Anne Mozley's theory of critical sympathy within the context of Victorian ideologies of gender, genre, and the evolving professional identity of the literary critic. I begin by analyzing Mozley's theory of fiction in order to demonstrate how her focus on sympathy inextricably links the critic's job to the novelist's. Most critics agreed that women were naturally adept at depicting the nuances of human feeling, and they also agreed that the best novels allowed readers to sympathetically identify with characters and situations. Mozley uses the same gender ideology that authorizes the lady novelist to authorize the lady critic. Just as the novelist asks the reader to sympathize with different characters, Mozley expects the critic to take the reader through multiple and opposing points of view before venturing a judgment. As her review of *Adam Bede* demonstrates, Mozley sees rational thought as sympathetic because it requires the thinker to imaginatively place herself in multiple viewpoints, including her antagonists.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, her description of George Eliot's novelistic style serves just as well to describe Mozley's own critical method of showing readers the "workings of her mind."<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Mozley's methods undermine the masculinization of

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9. Ibid., 441.

10. Ibid.

professional criticism in several ways. By revising the gendered theory of genres to make feeling central to criticism, Mozley asserts women's "natural" critical authority. Furthermore, her assumption that the critic must sympathize with readers in order to present rational thought opposes the professional critics' habit of alienating readers. Finally, Mozley's rhetorical method of enlisting readers' sympathy before taking them through multiple lines of argument allows her to introduce progressive arguments about women's issues to relatively conservative audiences.

Mozley's feminist and reader-friendly stance is especially interesting when we consider the journals she wrote for and the type of career she pursued. After twelve years of writing and editing for the *Christian Remembrancer* (a High Church magazine published by her family's press and co-edited by her brother, James Bowling Mozley), she launched her professional career in 1859 with four essays in the short-lived *Bentley's Quarterly Review*. She went on to contribute at least fifty-nine "middles" to the notoriously conservative *Saturday Review* between 1861 and 1864, and twenty-five articles to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from 1861 until her death in 1880. Evidence suggests she wrote much more, but even this partial bibliography reveals that Mozley was in a fine position to influence moderate to conservative upper-middle-class readers on literary and social topics for over thirty years.<sup>11</sup> These articles also demonstrate that Mozley, though always anonymous and often writing in

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11. As a result of Mozley's adamant secrecy, much of her work remains unidentified. It was only after her death, when her nephew published *Essays from Blackwood* with the byline "by the late Anne Mozley, author of *Essays on Social Subjects from the Saturday Review*," that some of Mozley's work for periodicals became known. In a prefatory memoir to that book, her nephew indicates that she consistently contributed review articles to the *Christian Remembrancer* from around 1847 until it ceased publication in 1868, but only two reviews

the loosely defined genre of the familiar essay, was consistent in her ideas about literature and criticism, even when they clashed with the editorial attitudes of the periodicals she was writing for. Ultimately, this chapter argues for a closer look at the gender work of Anne Mozley's sympathetic criticism and a more nuanced understanding of Victorian genres of criticism.

### **The Value of Sympathy**

In order to understand the place of sympathy in Anne Mozley's criticism, we must first consider the place she accords it in fiction. As early as 1859, Mozley outlines a theory of fiction that emphasizes sympathy and its social uses. She believes that readers of novels "expect to have our feelings roused, our fancy kindled, our knowledge of life enlarged, our taste cultivated, our social conscience refined and quickened."<sup>12</sup> This list, which yokes together amusement, personal improvement, and social responsibility, illustrates the components of Mozley's approach to literature. She firmly believed that literature must rouse the feelings before it can shape the mind, and that the sympathy evoked by literature could effect individual and social good. Like many Victorian critics, Mozley prefers a morally-improving version of realism. For Mozley, there are three corollaries to this view of fiction: first, an insistence that fiction be probable; second, that it strive for more than "mere effect" or feeling

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have been positively attributed to her. The two popular volumes of *Essays on Social Subjects from the Saturday Review* give us fifty-nine articles, but her nephew indicates that she wrote for the *Saturday Review* until 1877 and there is no record of Mozley's contributions after 1864.

12. Mozley, "Novels by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton," 73.

for its own sake; and third, that it avoid the “cold curiosity” that portrays the harshest scenes of life simply because they are “fact.” These tenets, of course, were not uniquely Mozley’s. These standards governed the circulating libraries to a greater or lesser degree and led many other critics, like Oliphant, to condemn sensational and naturalistic fiction. But it is useful to see how Mozley applied these standards because it shows us how she understood “truth” as something felt.

When Mozley asserts, “Truth ought surely to be something distinct from fact,” the “something” has to do with feeling, or what she sometimes calls “associations.”<sup>13</sup> Associations are partly produced by the author’s real experiences, which inspire the characters and scenes of the fiction. If the author has no associations, that is, no feeling for his or her subjects, the fiction can have no lasting effect on the reader. Even writing that is technically capable can fall short if it lacks the power of associations, according to Mozley, because “after all, there is something cold-blooded in mere portrait-painting.” She explains,

There is a power of description, graphic, lifelike, truthful, which engages and entertains us for a while, and then, we know not why, palls upon us. We cannot account for the fact, that, in spite of our testimony to its success, our attention is not chained, our sympathy flags. We do not doubt the reason to be, because the author has not felt in the process, he has merely observed: there is no other connection between him and his subject.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to cold-blooded portrait-painters, writers like George Eliot “infuse a life and virtue into their work, as though a warm south wind breathed around them; and this is the genial

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13. Mozley discusses “associations” at length in her essays on “George Sand” and “*Adam Bede* and Recent Novels.”

14. Mozley, “*Adam Bede* and Recent Novels,” 438.

influence of association connecting them closely with their subject.”<sup>15</sup> Mozley believes that the author’s sympathy underlies any good piece of writing. Further, she suggests that the palpable associations evoked by *Adam Bede* are achieved by something in the prose that exceeds mere description and conveys real feeling. Thus, associations also refer to the reader’s experience of reality. The novel should bring to life feelings and scenes that the reader knows and feels to be true.

George Eliot appreciated Mozley’s attention to sympathy in *Adam Bede*. She mentions Mozley’s review twice in letters to her friend Charles Bray, and she referred to it as “on the whole the best review we have seen.”<sup>16</sup> Her pleasure comes as no surprise when we consider George Eliot’s own preoccupation with sympathy. At the beginning of Book II of *Adam Bede*, “In Which The Story Pauses A Little,” Eliot makes her case for the value of sympathy in fiction. Eliot’s narrator states,

In this world there are so many of these common, coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Ibid.

16. Eliot to Charles Bray, 25 November 1859, in *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 3, 213-14. See also Eliot to Charles Bray, 7 September 1859, 148.

17. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 178.

Eliot then puts her philosophy of sympathy into the mouth of an older, wiser Adam who intones, “It isn’t notions sets people doing the right thing—it’s feelings.”<sup>18</sup> Like Eliot, Mozley also believes that by inspiring sympathetic feelings, novels improve the individual and thus the larger society. In “The Uses of Pathos” (1861), Mozley similarly suggests that the feeling evoked by fictional characters and plots ultimately benefits the larger community: “The use of pathos is an indirect one. It must soften and harmonise ourselves before it can benefit others. Its office is to overpower the degrading sense of petty personal worries which haunt and vex, and, what is worse, influence us all so much.”<sup>19</sup> Mozley goes on to argue, “we hold that the world is always better and more human for these deviations from its ordinary callous indifference of aspect, and that it is the part of literature to supply this healthful influence.”<sup>20</sup> Mozley’s theory of fiction fits perfectly with the thesis of *Adam Bede*, and it also seems to echo George Eliot’s 1856 essay, “The Natural History of German Life.” In this review of W.H. Riehl’s sociological works for *The Westminster Review*, George Eliot asserts that “a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.”<sup>21</sup> Mozley’s warm praise of *Adam Bede* and Eliot’s rare satisfaction with Mozley’s review make sense when we compare their strikingly similar theories of fiction. Both women argued that

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18. Ibid., 180.

19. Mozley, “The Uses of Pathos,” 268.

20. Ibid., 274.

21. Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” 30.

the ability to sympathize with that which is apart from ourselves translates into more humane social activity. Ideally, the moral sentiment gained from novel-reading yields more equitable laws and social attitudes. Anne Mozley embraced George Eliot's view of the novelist's responsibility, but more importantly, she believed that the critic's responsibility was much the same.

Although George Eliot recognized a sympathetic critic in *Bentley's* anonymous reviewer, the two women would have disagreed on what "sympathetic criticism" involves.<sup>22</sup> George Eliot's letters reveal that she also tried to formulate a "sympathetic criticism," primarily in response to critics' treatment of her novels. James Benson argues that it was "her firm conviction that sympathy is the prerequisite of responsible criticism. Only if a critic is receptive will it be possible for him to transcend the fragmentary approach."<sup>23</sup> The "fragmentary approach," which George Eliot particularly resented, refers to contemporary critics' habit of evaluating works according to categories such as character, plot, and style. Such an approach ignored the overall theme or purpose and focused instead on individual and seemingly unconnected aspects of the work. Benson argues, "Behind the implicit demand for a rethinking of the principles and categories of criticism there lies a plea for sympathy for her aims, for a certain open-mindedness, and for a willingness at least to try to see the novels

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22. Eliot never knew the true identity of her reviewer. Having heard from some sources that the author was named Mozley and was some sort of clergyman, she suspected Anne's brother.

23. Benson, "Sympathetic' Criticism," 429.

as unified wholes.<sup>24</sup> In this light, Mozley's attention to the process that leads to Hetty's infanticide fulfills George Eliot's wish that the work be taken as a whole. And if we compare the two writers' attitudes toward contemporary criticism, we find that Mozley similarly bemoans "the vulgar notion of critic as fault-finder" and argues that too often criticism focuses on the execution of a work, and not on the nature and fitness of the subject. Mozley states plainly that "such critics have lost the power of reading from their general failure of sympathy."<sup>25</sup> But even if Mozley's review of *Adam Bede* seems to provide Eliot with the response she desires, these two writers differ in important ways on how a "sympathetic criticism" might work.

Whereas George Eliot focuses on the sympathetic relationship between critic and author, Anne Mozley focuses on the critic's relationship to the reader. This critical attention to readers, as we saw in Chapter Two, began to appear amateurish from the 1860s onward among critics who wanted to professionalize their field. And Mozley's approach had two strikes against it because, in their efforts to distinguish themselves from ordinary readers, professional critics increasingly denigrated emotional responses to literature. As the discussion of "lady novelists" demonstrates, even though feeling was assumed to be integral to reading novels as well as writing them, its relationship to judging novels was tortuous, and it became increasingly vexed over the second half of the century as writers struggled to legitimate criticism as a professional field of knowledge. In order to distinguish themselves

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24. *Ibid.*, 434.

25. Mozley, "Uncritical Readers," 546.

from the ordinary reader, professional critics often claimed the ability to dissociate themselves from their feelings. We need only look to John Ruskin's explanation of "the pathetic fallacy," which warned against the tendency to perceive wrongly while under the influence of strong emotion. While the weaker mind is overpowered by feeling, the great man, according to Ruskin, "stands serene, and watches the feeling, as it were, from far off."<sup>26</sup> This same ambivalence about feeling in relation to judgment is reiterated in Leslie Stephen's 1877 assertion that: "To be an adequate critic is almost to be a contradiction in terms; to be susceptible to a force, and yet free from its influence; to be moving with the stream, and yet to be standing on the bank."<sup>27</sup> And Matthew Arnold's arguments for disinterestedness rely upon the same distrust of feelings. These assertions made criticism look more scientific and allowed the critic to claim a particular expertise, but in addition to alienating the ordinary reader, they also implicitly excluded women from the genre of criticism because conservative gender ideology coded women as incapable of the emotional detachment required for critical thought. But, in stark contrast to these critics, Anne Mozley's sympathetic criticism argues that sympathetic attachment, not artificial distance, defines the true practice of literary criticism.

For those who believe that distance is the key to criticism, rationality functions as a check on strong emotion. But Mozley inverts that typical relationship by calling attention to the analytical process that produces sympathy. She does so in her review of *Adam Bede* when

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26. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 3, 160. Ruskin argues that "an excited state of the feelings" makes one "for the time, more or less irrational." *Ibid.*, 155.

27. Stephen, "Charlotte Brontë," 723.

she asserts that “whatever views this writer expresses, they are clearly arrived at by a process of thought; the weight of calm conviction gives value to every sentiment whether we agree or not.”<sup>28</sup> According to Mozley, George Eliot’s novel tempers our judgment of Hetty, “vain and hard as she is,” by following “the workings of her mind”—that is, by analyzing the fallen woman’s fate into a series of intentions, ideas, hopes, and choices.<sup>29</sup> The reader may still disapprove of Hetty by the end of the novel, but in following the process of how Hetty comes to such an end—by tracing the tragic effect to a series of mundane causes—the reader must sympathize with her. Mozley demonstrates that the deep feeling associated with sympathy is actually achieved through critical analysis: by viewing the broader picture, understanding motives, and tracing effects to their causes. For Mozley, to be critical is to be sympathetic.

The real value of criticism, for Mozley, has little to do with the summary act of passing judgment. Instead, she believes that criticism should sympathetically unite reader and critic through a shared experience of felt associations and rational exercise. Rather than critical distance, Mozley strives for critical connection. Just as George Eliot’s narrative style would “venture on no expression until [s]he had traced it to its source,” Mozley’s criticism legitimates itself by forestalling judgment in order to reveal the process of her response.<sup>30</sup> This often means taking her reader through a variety of competing intellectual and emotional positions

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28. Mozley, “*Adam Bede* and Recent Novels,” 435.

29. *Ibid.*, 441.

30. *Ibid.*, 440. Although Mozley suspects that George Eliot is a woman, she uses the masculine pronoun throughout this review so as not to “invade the reserve the author seems determined to maintain.” *Ibid.*, 437.

before coming to a conclusion. For instance, in her essay on George Sand, Mozley acknowledges that some very respected authors, including Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Barrett, and Charlotte Brontë, claim that George Sand's works are moral.<sup>31</sup> Even though Mozley does not agree with this assessment, she pursues the question in order to understand what George Sand is really doing and how she has this effect on some readers. In addition to considering opposing opinions, Mozley frequently admits her own biases to better explain "the workings of her mind." For example, in her assessment of Bulwer Lytton, she credits his ability to garner popular praise: "he has been one of our leading, most prolific, most varied, and, if we estimate popularity by numbers of readers, most popular of our living novelists. This deserves to be called a career."<sup>32</sup> But she goes on to explain why his works fail with readers like her. She explains that there are two kinds of readers—those who suspend disbelief because they want escape, and those who require that the story and characters be believable—and states candidly that she is one of the latter. This is why the ultimate effect of Bulwer Lytton's fiction on her is disbelief and, consequently, dissatisfaction. Only after contextualizing her response in this way does Mozley delve into the question, "how has his ideal come to be so at odds with reason and nature?"<sup>33</sup> Although readers who look for escape rather than probability would come to a conclusion different from Mozley's, they could still follow and sympathize with the process of Mozley's assessment. Just as she says of Eliot's method, "the weight of calm conviction gives

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31. Mozley, "George Sand," 372.

32. Mozley, "Novels by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton," 75.

33. *Ibid.*, 77.

value to every sentiment whether we agree or not.”<sup>34</sup> Here and elsewhere, Mozley puts less emphasis on telling the reader what to think in favor of modeling *how* to think.

As she makes clear in her 1870 essay “On Fiction as an Educator,” novels play a key role in an individual’s intellectual development not so much by teaching moral lessons as “awak[ing] a faculty” for moral thought and action.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the best criticism, according to Mozley, provides the reader with the means to judge rather than a simple judgment. Thus, for the reader, the process of “tracing effects to their causes” becomes a literal enactment of sympathy as “feeling with” the critic. But Mozley also draws on the more common definition of sympathy as “fellow feeling,” in that she places herself on an equal plane with her reader rather than ascending to the prophet’s pedestal. It is this sense of fellow feeling that Mozley argues is missing from most criticism and that directly opposes her to critics like Carlyle, Arnold, and Ruskin who seek to elevate the critic above his readers.

Throughout her career, Mozley frequently laments those critics who adopt a tone of superiority. Her indictment of the condescending or dismissive critical tone is surprising, given the relatively conservative magazines for which she wrote. *Blackwood’s*, though comparatively subdued by the 1860s, still carried something of its early associations with the “harsh school of criticism,” and the *Saturday Review* proudly acknowledged its penchant for

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34. Mozley, “*Adam Bede* and Recent Novels,” 435.

35. Mozley, “On Fiction as an Educator,” 453.

negative reviewing.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, both of these magazines were staunch supporters of the anonymous system of publication, which, according to Dallas Liddle, tended to figure readers as uncritical and in need of direction.<sup>37</sup> Liddle's research on the rhetoric used in the debate over anonymity and signature helps us see the complexity of Mozley's situation. He argues that the "central metaphor for the relationship of readers and writers" used by anonymity advocates was "that of a wise teacher and his students." More specifically, he finds that "they prefer to construct [readers] as students sitting uncritically at the feet of a mentor."<sup>38</sup> Although Mozley frequently uses the metaphor of teacher and student to discuss the critic's relationship to the reader, her critical philosophy differs from both *Blackwood's* and the *Saturday Review's* in significant ways.<sup>39</sup>

Even while employing the metaphor of teacher and student, she consistently places the critic on an equal footing with the reader and insists that critics have a responsibility to justify their opinions—presumably to an intelligent audience. Mozley explains the nuances of her

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36. *Blackwood's* had been the medium for Francis Jeffrey's famous utterance against Wordsworth: "This will never do." And the *Saturday Review* proudly opposed the sort of emotional knowledge Mozley championed. An 1864 article entitled "Modern Sadducees" defends their "skepticism" in contrast to warm-hearted people who are easily led by their emotions.

37. *Blackwood's* held out until the 1880s, and the *Saturday Review* issued the famous argument that signature would open the profession to every "braying jackass."

38. Liddle, "Salesmen, Sportsmen, Mentors," 51.

39. Her commitment to anonymity was mostly a personal concern: as an unmarried woman living in the somewhat provincial area of Barrow-on-Trent, she did not want her neighbors to know about her professional activities. While many anonymous writers (women included) allowed their authorship to be leaked among certain literary circles, Mozley took great pains to avoid publicity.

analogy in an 1865 essay for *Blackwood's* on "Educators." She compares the "theoretical educator," who tends to "act upon a system rather than any study of nature," to the "trainer," who is willing to alter the system as he or she goes along in order to find the best plan for each situation. Mozley prefers the more dynamic model because the trainer "stands on some terms of equality with his pupil." She explains, "He never dreams of that tremendous distance, that gulf of superiority which is always required by the other school to separate trainer and scholar."<sup>40</sup> So even if Mozley sees herself as an educator, she refuses to treat the reader as uncritical or inferior. Indeed, she argues that a significant drawback of teachers (and we might well say critics) who adopt this stance of superiority is that they are more interested in indoctrinating than empowering their audience. Just as theoretical educators are content to have their students parrot their lessons rather than think for themselves, she believes that most critics stuff their readers with opinions without instructing them in how to be critical.

This is essentially her argument in "Uncritical Readers," an 1863 middle for the *Saturday Review*. Mozley lists three types of uncritical reader: fault finders who are sour and one-sided; domestic and prejudiced critics who all bow to one dictum; and those who have "blind faith in authors as such."<sup>41</sup> While it is possible to see this essay as a typical *Saturday Review* attack on uneducated readers, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Mozley's real target is current criticism. Ultimately, she asserts that if there is a lack of critical thought among readers, it is the fault of those critics who fail to give some "reason for their liking or

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40. Mozley, "Educators," 747.

41. Mozley, "Uncritical Readers," 546.

disliking.”<sup>42</sup> The essay sits uneasily in the pages of the *Saturday Review*, for the *Saturday* reviewers of the 1860s might very well be accused as “sour fault-finders” who all “bow to one dictum.” Merle Mowbray Bevington’s history of the magazine reports that its “much discussed ‘tone’” was “variously characterized by its critics as cynical, skeptical, hypercritical, malicious, and destructive.”<sup>43</sup> Bevington also notes that the “editorial unity” that makes it “possible to refer to what the *Saturday* said rather than to what a particular writer said in the *Saturday*” could only be achieved by hiring like-minded writers and/or limiting their range of discussion.<sup>44</sup> And yet Mozley refuses to bow to the *Saturday*’s dictum of cynicism and malice and, what’s more, uses her space within the magazine to critique the tone of the “Saturday Revilers.” Whether or not Mozley means to point a finger at the *Saturday Review* in particular or at the tone of periodical criticism in general, what is clear is that Mozley believes that most critics are too interested in passing judgment and not concerned enough with the process that would trace effects to their legitimate causes; in other words, the critic judges but fails to sympathize. The limitation of such a method is that the reader can only accept or reject the critic’s pronouncement, but cannot sympathize with the thought process that led to it. Without this sort of critical sympathy, the reader remains inferior to the critic and dependent upon him for his opinions.

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42. Ibid.

43. Bevington, *The Saturday Review, 1855-1868*, 43.

44. Ibid., 34.

Mozley's critique of distanced and dismissive critics also highlights the critic's responsibility to present rational thought in a manner with which readers can sympathize. As she explains in her review of *Adam Bede*, "there is a grave class of minds who cannot give their sympathy but through their experience: to such...the description of scenes and modes of life of which they have no personal knowledge, will tell nothing."<sup>45</sup> Part of *Adam Bede*'s success is that it "has found its way into hands indifferent to all previous fiction, to readers who welcome it as the voice of their own experience in a sense no other book has ever been."<sup>46</sup> Thus, to engage with such readers, Mozley often relies on the audience's common experiences for her evidence. In fact, she frequently appeals first to their biases and assumptions.

This method sometimes makes Mozley seem very conservative. We have already seen how her review of *Adam Bede* begins by affirming the stereotypes of men's and women's intellectual capabilities before offering the more progressive argument that "Genius, to be sure, is of no sex."<sup>47</sup> This is a pattern in Mozley's journalism: she initially takes a conservative pose to enlist readers' sympathy before taking them through multiple lines of argument. This method allows her to introduce progressive arguments, particularly about women's issues, to relatively conservative audiences. For example, Mozley seems to take the conservative side of the woman question in her October 1868 *Blackwood's* article where she refers to "Clever Women" as that "unpopular class...whom no other class particularly likes or cares to take into

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45. Mozley, "Adam Bede and Recent Novels," 433-34.

46. Ibid., 434.

47. Ibid., 437.

its bosom.”<sup>48</sup> But although she begins “Clever Women” by invoking conservative ideas about women’s roles, she soon retreats from this definition and begins to defend intelligent, unmarried women. She asks whether it is fair that women have no other options. By adopting an initially conservative stance, Mozley establishes a credibility with her *Blackwood’s* audience that allows her to consider a variety of differing positions and, consequently, makes it possible for her readers to entertain those progressive arguments as well.<sup>49</sup> Such maneuvers encouraged contemporary readers to sympathize with the claims of “clever women” without feeling that their own traditions were under attack. Her negative review of J.S. Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* offers another example of this. In this essay, she defines feminine strength as “a greater power of imbibing knowledge from collateral sources”—a skill which sounds like women’s intuition—and goes on to say that the power of “sustained attention and concentration of the mind” is not characteristic of female intellect.<sup>50</sup> Her opposition to women’s suffrage marks her as conservative, yet her critique of *The Subjection of Women* rests more on rhetorical grounds than on the woman question. She rebukes Mill for “His intense arrogance, his incapacity to do justice to the feelings or motives of all from whom he differs, [and] his intolerance of all but his own disciples.” Noting that “the want of sympathy in Mr. Mill excites a strong antagonism,” Mozley suggests that those who disagree with Mill’s

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48. Mozley, “Clever Women,” 411.

49. Joanne Wilkes similarly argues that Mozley articulates conventional male attitudes about women in order to make unconventional points more palatable to her readers and her editor.

50. Mozley, “Mr. Mill On the Subjection of Women,” 314.

arguments will remain unmoved on the woman question, and may even become more adamantly opposed to it.<sup>51</sup> In short, Mill has ignored the theme of Mozley's 1861 essay "On Manners," which argues that "success cannot be gained but through imparting pleasure, ease, and comfort to those with whom we associate or in any way have to do."<sup>52</sup>

Mozley's position as an anonymous writer allows her to impart whatever "ease" she thinks her audience requires, and one pose that is fundamental for Mozley and many other women critics is the masculine or gender-neutral persona. Mozley often assumes a male persona by referring to her "boyhood" or her school days (which the reader may unknowingly read as days at Oxford, though Mozley only had that experience vicariously through her brothers). Even when she forgoes such overtly male identifiers, she maintains a gender-neutral persona by avoiding any references to her female identity, and this seems to be a concession to her audience. But if her readers felt reassured by a masculine persona, Mozley frequently used the safety of this position to reveal the illogical foundations of sexism in literature. In her assessment of Bulwer Lytton's career, she cites his particular flaw in the creation of female characters. Bulwer Lytton argues "by example that the ideal female has no reason."<sup>53</sup> She offers examples from several of his novels in which the hero is rewarded with "a real veritable *idiot*" for a helpmate.<sup>54</sup> Even in *Ernest Maltravers*, which she considers one of his

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51. Ibid., 320.

52. Mozley, "On Manners," 165.

53. Mozley, "Novels by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton," 87.

54. Ibid.

best works, Mozley finds good reason to feel outraged by such characterization and “apologise[s] to our fair readers for pointing out the painful fact that twice Sir E.B. Lytton

likens his favorite heroine to a *dog*.”<sup>55</sup> When clever women do appear in his stories, they do to flirt with, to lead the hero through the necessary vicissitudes of feeling, to rack his sensibilities, and teach him experience; but our author never lets any one he cares for marry a woman of superior intellect: he would not do him such an ill turn.<sup>56</sup>

Most interesting in this line of Mozley’s criticism is that she charges Bulwer Lytton with “forcibly embodying the idea that woman should be all heart and no head.”<sup>57</sup> This dispute returns us to the discourse about “lady novelists” and Ludlow’s assertion that “We know, all of us, that if the man is the head of humanity, woman is its heart.”<sup>58</sup> When Mozley remarks that Bulwer Lytton’s “conception of female excellence tastes a little of the old school,” she points out that

the august band of female novelists has changed all this, and set up counter ideals from the old, soft, submissive, gentle type—women who can stand alone, reason, lead, instruct, command; female characters wrought out with such power that they take hold on men’s minds.<sup>59</sup>

If her statements here are more overtly feminist, this is likely due to the more liberal tone of *Bentley’s*. Here, she can directly challenge the popular critical assertion that “the most

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55. *Ibid.*, 92.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 87.

58. Ludlow, “Ruth,” 168.

59. Mozley, “Novels by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton,” 91-92.

charming heroines and the most profound insights into female psychology came from men.<sup>60</sup> But even in the more conservative *Blackwood's*, Mozley similarly, if more subtly, undermines the image of women as all feeling with no intellect. In her essay on "Educators" (1865), Mozley defends mothers, governesses, and nursery maids whom "theoretical" educators frequently use as scapegoats.<sup>61</sup> Such criticisms, she argues, unfairly cast blame on women for being "weak-willed." In both cases, Mozley does her best to revise the notion that feminine feeling is irrational. What she supplies instead is a union of feeling and rationality as the highest form of thought.

### **Sage Feminism**

Just as Mozley's feminist arguments are sometimes obscured by initially conservative rhetoric, her work as a literary critic is sometimes hidden by its genre. Indeed, it's easy to understand how scholars have excluded Mozley from the category of criticism if they only look for reviews and essays explicitly about art. Though she reviewed a number of important works for *Blackwood's*, *Bentley's*, and the *Christian Remembrancer*, the bulk of her identified journalistic writing takes the form of essays on social subjects.<sup>62</sup> With titles like "Clever Women," "Snubbing," "Busy People," and "On Manners," her middles for the *Saturday Review* and many of her essays for *Blackwood's* might seem like light fare because they use a reflective

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60. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 148.

61. Mozley, "Educators," 749.

62. Thus, the *Wellesley Index* and the *DNB* both list her as an "essayist."

style of social observation trained on mundane things. But because Victorian discussions of literature were not confined to reviews, we miss an important part of their conversation if we impose such generic limits. Indeed, when we consider that the prevailing view of fiction was that it helped form character and morals, that it instructed and soothed, it makes sense that much of the Victorians' discussion of literature would take place in the form of the familiar essay. It's also worth noting that canonical critics like Carlyle and Arnold infrequently wrote reviews and preferred the essay form. So rather than dismiss Mozley's essays as light literature, I read them as "sage" writing.

I find the designation "sage" particularly useful for Mozley because it does not align strictly with a particular genre. John Holloway, whose 1953 study first applied the term "sage" to this type of Victorian prose, identifies sages by their thematic concerns and their argumentative strategies, rather than the genre in which they work. Thus, his study includes essayists, novelists, a politician, and a clergyman. For Holloway, writers like Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, George Eliot, John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Thomas Hardy share a common goal: "all of these authors insist on how acquiring wisdom is somehow an opening of the eyes, making us see in our experience what we failed to see before."<sup>63</sup> Thus, they focus on ordinary experiences, and they argue through example rather than direct assertion. This provides a good description of Mozley's essays on social subjects. She, too, trains her critical eye on commonplace themes of social life. And like Holloway's sages, her goal is to show her readers something new in an ordinary experience. For example, everyone

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63. Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 9.

has felt a snub, but Mozley's essay on "Snubbing" (1861) "invites the reader," in Holloway's words, "to meditate humbly and carefully on some assertion that [s]he admits is essentially simple."<sup>64</sup> Mozley analyzes the power a snubber wields over his target, explaining that a snub only hurts if we feel safe, if we assume sympathy and are suddenly exposed. While snubbers seem to hold all the power, Mozley leads her reader to see that, in fact, snubbers lose their power because they create a barrier that shuts them out of their friends' secrets. Similarly, Mozley leads her readers to try on two perspectives in her essay "On Manners." She warns her readers against affectation but then urges tolerance for those guilty of it "when it results from a desire to take a place, to be *something*." After all,

There are many people who have aspirations which they have no legitimate means of satisfying; and to have a place, a field in which a man may air and show himself, and work out his ideal, is one of these, and a frequent one.<sup>65</sup>

By applying her method of tracing effects to their causes, Mozley subtly enjoins the reader to think critically about received notions. Thus, a discussion of "Dress" leads her to speculate that women focus more on dress because they have no other property that society will allow them to really call their own.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, if sage writing is characterized, at least in part, by an appeal to the reader's experience of the world, Mozley's essays fit the description. She never forgets that the only way to effect change in an audience is to appeal to experience and to do so through both reason and feeling.

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64. Ibid., 4-5.

65. Mozley, "On Manners," 156.

66. She also attributes "masculine" touches in contemporary women's fashions—such as "hat and paletot and booted ankle"—to the growing debate about Women's Rights. "Dress," 434.

And there are other good reasons to consider Mozley within the sage tradition. Her view of literature as an educator is strikingly similar to Carlyle's argument that "The true University of these days is a Collection of Books."<sup>67</sup> Just as Carlyle imagines individuals finding their own education, Mozley links genius to undirected and early reading. Observing that autobiographies of great artists always cite the influence of some early reading, Mozley asserts that

every man who ever took up a book for his diversion, can look back to some particular book as an event in his inner history; can trace to it a start in thought, an impulse directing the mind in channels unknown before, but since familiar and part of his very being. He perhaps wonders how the book, being such as it is, should have wrought such marvels, but of the fact he cannot doubt: he was different after reading it from what he was before; his mind was opened by it, his interests widened, his views extended, his sense of life quickened.<sup>68</sup>

Mozley's description of literature's effect fits well with Holloway's description of the sage style: "conviction comes here essentially from modifying the reader's perceptiveness, from stimulating him to notice something to which he was previously blind. ...it is seeing old things in a new way."<sup>69</sup> This is essentially what Mozley achieves by applying her "system of tracing effects to their causes" to aspects of everyday life.

But unlike traditional sage writers, Mozley eschews the prophetic tone. Carlyle, who talked about the "Priesthood of the Writers of Books," figured the man of letters as an inspired

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67. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 145.

68. Mozley, "On Fiction as an Educator," 449.

69. Holloway, *The Victorian Sage*, 9.

being whose vision revealed truths to his readers.<sup>70</sup> As Linda Peterson explains, the sage's "unique perspective on his society" is predicated on his marginality or distance "from the mistaken masses."<sup>71</sup> And indeed, most literary scholars consider this persona the sage's defining characteristic. But I prefer Peterson's expanded definition of sage writing, which includes those who "preferred to write from the stance of the practical man or woman, emphasizing the commonsensical or even the mundane as their source of knowledge."<sup>72</sup> As we have seen, women writers like Anne Mozley and Margaret Oliphant often highlight their connection to the masses, or at least to their audience. Instead of figuring themselves as marginal, these women critics emphasize their similarity or representativeness in order to persuade their readers. This persona is key to Mozley's sympathetic criticism, which requires closeness rather than distance. She relies upon her ability to sympathize with the reader in appealing first to shared experiences, and she enlists the reader's sympathy by "tracing effects to their causes" and demonstrating "the workings of her mind." Neither of these would be possible if she assumed the prophet's pedestal.

This sympathy with the reader distinguishes Anne Mozley's writing from the typical examples of sage discourse and, indeed, much of the critical rhetoric of the 1860s onward. It also aligns her with other women critics like Oliphant who sensed that the fate of the reader was wrapped up with the fate of the woman critic. As critics became increasingly interested in

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70. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 150.

71. Peterson, "Sage Writing," 378.

72. *Ibid.*, 382.

establishing their professional credentials and even their “scientific basis,”<sup>73</sup> the “amateur” reader with his (and more often her) subjectively emotional responses proved an easy target to define themselves against. In contrast, Mozley consistently argues that the best kind of critic—whether literary or social—is in sympathy with the reader. This means acknowledging the feelings evoked by fiction, rather than suppressing them. It means explaining one’s judgments, or as she says, “tracing effects to their causes.” And above all, it means engaging the reader in a process, not a product, of criticism. While many writers touted criticism’s capacity for social amelioration, Mozley’s method actually aimed to empower readers to become more critical. Mozley’s method of presenting multiple points of view and tracing effects to their causes may be light on definitive judgments, but whether or not Mozley converts her readers—or even wishes to convert them—she leads them to consider multiple points of view, which is the foundation of both critical thinking and sympathy.

Furthermore, Mozley’s rejection of the prophetic tone can be seen as a rejection of the masculine identity associated with the professional critic. Sage writing grew out of Carlyle’s desire to make the writer a professional (and even a hero). Peterson argues that anxieties about authorship were a chief impulse, among several other cultural conditions, that gave birth to the sage mode of writing. She states, “To avoid the charge of writing hackwork or piecework, authors needed to justify their ‘brain work’ and offer their readers something more than the daily pap of newspaper reportage.”<sup>74</sup> James Eli Adams similarly argues that writers

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73. Stephen, “Charlotte Brontë,” 723.

74. Peterson, “Sage Writing,” 374.

were eager to legitimate writing as a profession to counter the “feminization” of such labor. This construction of the critic’s authorship undermines the female critic’s authority, so it makes sense that women writers like Mozley would seek an alternative model of critical authority.

We see more clearly now that Mozley can embrace the argument that women are naturally suited to write novels because she presents the novel as an appropriate organ for social commentary and even social change. In other words, Mozley defines the terms of the conversation so that a woman’s “natural” capability to write novels underwrites her equally natural critical authority. And while Mozley is glad to embrace the notion that women are by nature more emotional, she will not relinquish a woman’s claim to rationality. Instead, just as she links sympathy with rationality in her review of *Adam Bede*, Mozley blurs gender distinctions and applies them as a means to her surprisingly feminist ends. Her effort to resolve the seeming conflict between emotional and critical response not only authorizes the lady critic, but also challenges the dominant discourses of professionalism that define the critic as superior to the ordinary reader. While many other writers were trying to professionalize criticism by highlighting their ability to turn off their feelings, Mozley’s critical theory foregrounds a faculty that was stereotypically feminine as the touchstone of critical authority. By redefining the terms of the genre, Mozley sought to make a space for women in criticism. And in this light, it seems ironic that Mozley has received so little attention from Victorian studies or histories of literary criticism. Her case suggests that we, too, need to redefine the terms of the critical genre to take full account of the nineteenth-century critical conversation.

## Chapter 4

### The “Other of Science”: Julia Wedgwood on Literature as the Moral Ideal

*Hegel has called Spirit the Other of Nature; if this be true, there must be a knowledge which is the Other of Science.<sup>1</sup>*

Julia Wedgwood (1833-1913) wrote for a number of highly regarded periodicals including *Macmillan's*, the *British Quarterly Review*, the *National Review*, the *Westminster Review*, and weeklies like the *Spectator* and the *Reader*, but the bulk of her periodical work was for the *Contemporary Review*. Most of the forty-three articles she contributed to the *Contemporary* between 1870 and 1907 focus on literary issues, and for three years she was responsible for “Contemporary Records: Fiction,” the magazine’s quarterly review of new novels. Given that all but two of these articles were signed, we might well wonder why such a career languishes in obscurity. Indeed, Wedgwood not only signed her journalism and five book-length works, she also had the advantage of signing a name that connected her to a number of famous Victorians.<sup>2</sup> In the previous two chapters, I have focused on women whose work remained hidden at least in part because they wrote anonymously, but when we turn to

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1. Wedgwood, *The Moral Ideal*, 465.

2. Wedgwood wrote two novels in the 1850s under the pseudonym Florence Dawson. Her non-fiction works include three studies of theological issues from a historical perspective including *John Wesley and the Evangelical Reaction of the Eighteenth Century* (1870), *The Moral Ideal: A Historic Study* (1888; new and revised edition 1907), and *The Message of Israel in the Light of Modern Criticism* (1894), a collection of her periodical work entitled *Nineteenth Century Teachers and Other Essays* (1908), and *The Personal Life of Josiah Wedgwood the Potter* (1915). This last project was a concession to her family, and she died before it was finished. Prof. C.H. Herford finished editing the manuscript and prefaced it with a memoir of Julia.

the very public career of Julia Wedgwood, her continued absence from twentieth-century histories of criticism requires some further explanation.

The best place to start is with a connection that was not widely known during her lifetime. Julia Wedgwood is best known today for her “broken friendship” with Robert Browning. Their letters, which were discovered in the back of a drawer in Wedgwood’s niece’s home in 1935 and published by editor Richard Curle in 1937, revealed an intensely intellectual and intimate attachment, as well as a bitter final parting, that had remained a secret for decades. The letters tell a fascinating story, and it is no wonder that critics have devoted their attention to discerning what remains untold. Besides speculating on the subtextual romance in the letters, critics have been most interested in their discussion of Browning’s verse novel, *The Ring and the Book*. But while Browning scholars immediately hailed the letters as a rare source of the poet’s own thoughts on his work, Wedgwood’s half of this exchange has been treated as merely the stimulus for the great poet’s defense. This is surprising given that Browning held her critical opinion in high esteem even when they disagreed, but reviewers of the 1930s are reacting to what Curle describes as “Miss Wedgwood’s strictures.”<sup>3</sup> Wedgwood’s response to *The Ring and the Book* centers around her observation that Browning’s interest in “the physiology of wrong” is “unduly prominent,” and such an unabashedly moral approach to the poem did not endear her to critics in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to the letters, Curle repeatedly depicts Wedgwood as prim and moralizing. Of Wedgwood’s half of the

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3. Curle, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, viii.

4. *Ibid.*, 137.

correspondence, Curle writes, “It must be admitted that she was rather a prosy and long-winded letter-writer, not unintelligent, by any means, but with a constant tendency to moralize.”<sup>5</sup> Curle’s casually dismissive treatment of Wedgwood allowed many reviewers of the collected letters to judge her, as both a critic and a woman, even more harshly. *The Spectator* takes Curle’s suggestion and runs with it, imagining Wedgwood as trapped in Victorian morality: “The net of propriety had closed around her; the moral atmosphere had stiffened; she was shocked by what she thought the brutality of his characters; she criticised without insight; and urged him to seek more edifying themes.”<sup>6</sup> The *TLS* reviewer characterizes her as “erring and innocent.”<sup>7</sup> A reviewer for the *Saturday Review of Literature* opined that the letters “exhibit her feminine anfractuosity and his unlimited forbearance.”<sup>8</sup> While early twentieth-century critics dismissed Wedgwood as moralizing, recent scholars only skirt the question by

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5. *Ibid.*, xii. These comments indicate that Wedgwood’s letters were not of great interest to Curle and might explain why he excluded some of them. He states that it is only “for the sake of unity” that he includes “all her letters which answered letters from Browning or led to letters from him.” Curle includes seventy-two letters in all, forty-two written by Wedgwood and thirty by Browning. It has been suggested that the family withheld some of Wedgwood’s letters to suppress certain details of the romance. The exact nature of the missing letters remains unclear because they disappeared shortly after Curle’s edited volume was published and have not been studied since. The letters were purchased by Halsted B. Vander Poel, whose vast collection of manuscripts and first editions lay in boxes for most of the twentieth century. When the collection was auctioned off by Christie’s in 2004, Baylor University’s Armstrong Browning Library purchased the Browning-Wedgwood letters. But the collection seems to be both more and less complete, as they list forty-four letters by Wedgwood and twenty-nine by Browning.

6. Waugh, “A Victorian Friendship,” 516.

7. “A Browning Episode,” 691.

8. Bacon, “A Literary Discovery,” 12.

focusing on the subtextual romance with Browning. I do not deny the possibility of such a subtext, but I argue that both approaches fail to take Wedgwood's criticism of *The Ring and the Book* seriously.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter situates Wedgwood's criticism—including her response to Browning's poem—within one of the Victorian era's greatest intellectual problems: the crisis of authority brought on by the clash of scientific and moral discourses. Even a cursory glance at the titles of her periodical essays demonstrates her preoccupation with the relation of morals to both literature and science: "The Boundaries Of Science" (1860 & 1861), "The Moral Influence of George Eliot" (1881), "Morals And Politics" (1891), "Fiction And Faith" (1892), "Ethics And Literature" (1897), "Ethics And Science" (1897), "Knowledge and Faith" (1907). Like many Victorians, Wedgwood was concerned about what would form the foundation of morals in a society that could no longer depend on religious orthodoxy, and she sees literature as an arena for the larger debate of faith and doubt. While this view may rightly be called a moral one, it is no more moralizing than the arguments of canonical Victorian critics like Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, or Matthew Arnold, who were also interested in the way literature can take over the moral or motivational function previously served by religion.

By analyzing Wedgwood's distinction between "the truth of morals" and "the truth of science," I show how she views literature's part in the larger question of faith and doubt. As her history of ideas, *The Moral Ideal* (1907) makes clear, Wedgwood sees moral and scientific

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9. For example, Barbara Stone argues that Wedgwood's criticism was not really about *The Ring and the Book* at all, but rather a mask for the subtext of her personal regrets and recriminations.

knowledge in a Hegelian dialectic. Since science has cast doubt upon the old religious orthodoxy, Wedgwood argues that something else must offer the antithesis of science, and she believes that literature can fulfill the role of this “other.” This defines literature’s legitimate methods and goals for her, and we see this in both her critique of Browning’s poem and her later journalism. Whether or not Wedgwood’s response to *The Ring and the Book* reflects her personal feelings for Browning, her arguments about the poem are consistent with the ideas presented in her criticism for periodicals. This same dialectic informs her critical method as she reads contemporary literature as an index of the new faiths that have sprung up to replace the old. To Wedgwood’s mind, people were all too eager to transfer faith from a flawed divine authority to some equally flawed secular authority such as science, democracy, individualism, culture, or even heroic “men of letters.” Thus, much of her criticism points to the dangers of elevating any particular genius or discourse as absolute authority; in short, she writes against hero worship. Ultimately, Wedgwood’s belief that oppositional discourse is necessary for progress puts her criticism into interesting dialogue with other nineteenth-century critical theories, including Carlyle’s notion of the “hero as man of letters,” George Eliot’s arguments for sympathy, and *fin-de-siècle* ideas about the art of fiction. It also has contributed to Wedgwood’s poor reputation among modern scholars who seem to be swayed by their own hero worship. There’s no denying that some of Julia Wedgwood’s critical readings of now-canonical authors will be unpalatable to twenty-first century aesthetics. Nevertheless, her method is an essential part of the Victorian critical landscape, and the history of criticism should not marginalize her moral concerns for literature simply because they are no longer

fashionable. Ultimately, I argue that Julia Wedgwood's moral approach to literature represents a sophisticated critical response to some of the most contentious debates of the Victorian era.

### **The Boundaries of Science**

Julia Wedgwood's family connections and upbringing seem to have guaranteed her a nuanced perspective on the debate between moral and scientific knowledge. Charles Darwin was her second cousin on her father's side, as well as her uncle by marriage (Darwin married Wedgwood's paternal aunt Emma). Her father, Hensleigh Wedgwood, was a renowned philologist who had, according to family biographers, "dismissed the absolute authority of the Bible and had developed an interest in spiritualism."<sup>10</sup> Julia's mother, Frances Mackintosh Wedgwood, was the daughter of Sir James Mackintosh, the Liberal MP who had debated the French Revolution with Burke. She hosted salons at which Julia was surrounded by many of the greatest theological, scientific, and literary minds of the time, including Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, William Thackeray, and, of course, Browning. And through her mother's connections, Julia Wedgwood had the opportunity to attend Harriet Martineau's school, serve as Elizabeth Gaskell's secretary and research assistant, and develop a close friendship with Florence Nightingale. The Wedgwoods' connections also made it possible for Julia to spend long visits at the homes of the religious leaders Frederick Denison Maurice and Thomas Erskine. Such diverse influences surely contributed to Julia Wedgwood's intellectualism and her ability to consider multiple and conflicting positions. Indeed, it was

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10. Wedgwood and Wedgwood, *The Wedgwood Circle*, 247.

her capacity for philosophical thought that first attracted Browning's attention. Their correspondence frequently takes up the question of faith and doubt and—contrary to the moralizing image offered by Curle's introduction—demonstrates that Wedgwood had little patience for unquestioning belief in traditional orthodoxy. She expresses her dissatisfaction with traditional religious faith in one of her earliest letters to him, on June 27, 1864, just after her brother's death. Replying to Browning's condolences, she welcomes his letter as “the utterance of a mind opposed to all authoritative forms of traditional belief, such as most rest on at moments like these, but which have no support for me.” Though she disclaims the comfort of traditional authority, she goes on to describe her desire to let faith and doubt, or spirituality and intellectualism, co-exist. She tells him,

I find more possibility of approach towards—those minds which can retain the hope of the future amid the complex suggestions of intellectual doubt, and the distrust of that mere wish which forms so large a part of the faith of most people.<sup>11</sup>

And Wedgwood's doubt was not instigated by the tragedy of her brother's death. She had read and been inspired by Darwin's theory of evolution and the arguments of the Higher Criticism, which certainly contributed to the “complex suggestions of intellectual doubt” for many Victorians. She had even published a review of *On the Origin of Species* in 1860 that garnered praise from Darwin himself. He wrote to her on July 11, 1861, “I think that you understand my book perfectly, and that I find a very rare event with my critics.”<sup>12</sup> This two-part essay, which appeared in *Macmillan's* under the title “The Boundaries of Science,” lays out

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11. Curle, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, 9-10.

12. Darwin to Julia Wedgwood, 11 July 1861, in *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Vol. 9, 200.

Wedgwood's dialectical view of scientific and moral discourse and serves as an important precursor to her literary theory.

"The Boundaries of Science" defends Darwin's theory of natural selection against charges that it destroys faith in the creator. The article asserts scientific inquiry as a discourse free from the bounds of moral questions, but it simultaneously makes space for moral discourse as a distinct and dialectical other. Wedgwood's belief that moral and scientific discourse converse without converging is reflected in the form of the essay. "The Boundaries of Science" is written as a philosophical dialogue between Philalethes ("lover of the true") and Philacalos ("lover of the good"). As Philacalos presents a series of moral objections to the theory of evolution, Philalethes counters that

you are transplanting the discussion to a region where the author of the hypothesis is not bound to follow you. All that he is bound to do, is to show that his hypothesis supplies an adequate explanation of all facts lying within the science which it professes to explain.<sup>13</sup>

Philalethes' argument that the "researches of the man of science must not be cramped by fears of trespassing on the entangled boundary of a neighboring domain" defends scientific inquiry, but he does so by establishing the separate purpose of science and moral philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Wedgwood uses Philalethes to argue that scientific investigation must be allowed to range freely over the natural world because its purpose is to increase knowledge by discovering new facts. By the same token, moral discourse must be allowed to contemplate what is beyond the natural world because its purpose is to discover right ways of living. Thus, the dialogue

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13. Wedgwood, "The Boundaries of Science: A Dialogue," 135.

14. *Ibid.*, 136.

demonstrates that there is no benefit to *anyone* in holding the scientist responsible for the moral applications of his hypothesis because, as Philalethes argues,

For him to adjust it to other views of truth would be as if the maker of this microscope had endeavored to contrive such a combination of lenses as should allow of its being used, under certain circumstances, as a telescope. We may rest assured that, in the one case, our knowledge of the stars and the infusoria would suffer equally; and in the other, that we should have a medley of very poor moral philosophy, and very poor natural science.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Wedgwood suggests that forcing the dictates of science onto moral philosophy—as, for example, Social Darwinists would try to do—would yield a distorted view of human relations or moral duty. Essentially, she argues that where the one field of inquiry ends, the other begins. In 1907, Wedgwood would express the same idea in *The Moral Ideal*:

The truth sought by the one ends where the truth sought by the other begins, and their several methods are not only different but opposite. Scientific truth needs nothing in its discipline but intellect and attention. The other truth demands the co-operation of something else within the man before it can be discerned; and this something else is not only what Science lacks, but what it forbids.<sup>16</sup>

In an essay on “Ethics and Literature” (1897), Wedgwood asserts,

The truth of science shows us what good eyes could see anywhere and always. It does not convey any personal stamp on its deliverances, it does not show us what one person can see and not another, both being in an equally good position for observation. It is impartial and a school of impartiality.<sup>17</sup>

But Wedgwood counters that some truths cannot be proven by gathering data, and we need a discourse that helps us see what is not empirically available to any set of eyes. Therefore the danger in making science and its methods the only route to knowledge is that those kinds of

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15. Ibid., 135.

16. Wedgwood, *The Moral Ideal*, 465-66.

17. Wedgwood, “Ethics and Literature,” 66.

truth will be ignored. And in the absence of religious orthodoxy, she believes that literature provides a venue for considering the sort of unknowables that used to be articles of faith.

Like many critics of her time, Wedgwood sees a parallel between the language of morals and literature in that both deal with something beyond our physical experience, not just unknowns but unknowables. Thus, as her reviews of new fiction for the *Contemporary Review* frequently assert, her “first requirement from a novel” is “that it should show us something we could not have discovered for ourselves.”<sup>18</sup> For Wedgwood, fiction’s “true function” is to “relieve the imagination by opening a vista through and beyond the darkness and failure of actual experience.”<sup>19</sup> Wedgwood consciously aligns the purpose of literature with the function of moral discourse, for she anticipates objections by claiming that the common assumption “that a work of art must stand the lower for a serious moral purpose” is “a very *banal* judgment.”<sup>20</sup> Wedgwood reminds her readers that many of the greatest writers of the nineteenth century—Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, George Eliot—have been equal parts preacher. She describes George Eliot’s works as “the liveliest fiction held in solution by the most eloquent preaching.”<sup>21</sup> And literature has always been capable of this function, she argues:

[I]f we turn to its classic specimens, we must confess...that it has done something to mould the moral ideal of the world. Whatever may be thought of

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18. Wedgwood, “Contemporary Records: Fiction” (July 1883), 137.

19. Wedgwood, “Contemporary Records: Fiction” (May 1885), 754.

20. Wedgwood, “The Moral Influence of George Eliot,” 174.

21. *Ibid.*, 176.

a moral aim in fiction from an artistic point of view, from the historic it is one we cannot choose but recognize.<sup>22</sup>

Pointing to the works of Sophocles and Aeschylus, Wedgwood explains that these works are moral in the sense that “the events and characters depicted by them present to the reader’s mind thoughts which stand in close relation to the conscience, and affect the reader...as an expression of sympathy or of disapproval on the part of their author.” Such works, she explains, “make us feel that every step they follow has a certain moral direction. We are, at every development in the drama, led nearer to a moral goal.”<sup>23</sup> This is precisely what science lacks (and rightly so) according to Wedgwood: the literary skill of selection, or what she sometimes calls “reticence” or “reserve.” Whereas science must be open to all data and able to present it without any sort of leading moral direction, literature selects particular details and a particular point of view to tell its story. In doing so, Wedgwood argues, it can offer a glimpse at other truths.

The fundamental assumption of Wedgwood’s criticism is that the goals of literary discourse are distinct from the goals of science and must remain so in order to be successful. Thus, she argues that when fiction renounces the duty to select, when it adopts science’s “unreserve,” it loses its discursive power. She writes:

Ours is, in the deepest and widest sense of the word, the age of unreserve; all that our forefathers held sacred is brought forward to be flung into the crucible of research, and the relation of the sexes is no exception. The art which depicts

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22. Wedgwood, “Contemporary Records: Fiction” (July 1883), 134.

23. Wedgwood, “The Moral Influence of George Eliot,” 176.

the whole of life corresponds to a theory which sanctions the whole of impulse.<sup>24</sup>

Wedgwood attributes the loss of reserve to the influence of science on art, and franker depictions of sexual desire are only one symptom of it.<sup>25</sup> She also sees science's inappropriate influence on literature in stylistic changes such as the manner of description and perspective. For example, in her review of Henry James's *The Bostonians*, Wedgwood cites James's frequent asides and narration of every detail from every character's head as an example of "that obsequious deference which Literature has in these days shown to triumphant Science; an instance of that obliteration of all reserve which the new lawgiver demands and she abhors."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in a review of *War and Peace*, she describes Tolstoy's "vivid, but too photographic sketches of the Napoleonic struggle with Russia."<sup>27</sup> The "photographic school," according to Wedgwood, results from literature's new enslavement to science in the nineteenth century:

If the simplicity and distinctness of the Greek drama be naturally associated with the work of the sculptor; if the glow of Shakespeare, the tender colouring of Dante, give the painter his poetic reflex; the modern school of fiction, tinged as it is by an abhorrence of reserve, bred of modern science, and any quality of attention to every separate interest, bred of modern democracy, may be fitly

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24. Wedgwood, "Count Leo Tolstoi," 259.

25. "Unreserve" has a sexual connotation for Wedgwood, but it does not refer exclusively to fiction's treatment of the relations of the sexes, and she does not devote much of her criticism to this subject. Indeed, she expresses mixed feelings about the novel's decreasing reticence on the subject of sex in 1892: "in general the loss of reticence is a disadvantage to art. But there is no doubt that it gains largely in artistic possibilities by dropping this particular form of reserve." "Fiction and Faith" 222. Her position on sex in fiction is similar to Henry James's in "The Future of the Novel."

26. Wedgwood, "Contemporary Records: Fiction" (August 1886), 301.

27. Wedgwood, "Contemporary Records: Fiction" (December 1886), 901.

compared with the new pictorial art which gives all within the field of vision in its exact proportion and its fullness of detail.<sup>28</sup>

In this essay devoted solely to considering Tolstoy's art, she explains: "the student of the physical world never permits himself to use the word 'trivial.' He knows no hierarchy of statements; for him all facts stand on one level." But Wedgwood argues that "this canon of science" is a "heresy of literature" for many things are trivial to art, and the artist must know what to exclude in order to tell the story or convey the meaning.<sup>29</sup> Rather than deferring to science, Wedgwood believes novelists like James and Tolstoy should provide a productive antithesis to it.

Besides indulging in scientifically detailed description, contemporary writers also seem to have renounced any point of view, according to Wedgwood. It may seem surprising that she leveled this charge at Henry James, who has so often been praised as a master of point of view. James himself explained his method as establishing one consciousness as the "centre of interest" which would organize the narrative.<sup>30</sup> James's goal was to give the reader the experience of viewing the world through one particular perspective, but it didn't particularly matter to him whether the reader could sympathize with the perspective or consciousness that organized the story. Wedgwood's objection to this method is that he has us view problems through a "languid but wakeful curiosity" that is more akin to the habit of science than

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28. Wedgwood, "Count Leo Tolstoi," 250.

29. *Ibid.*, 249-50.

30. James, "Preface" to *Roderick Hudson*, 16.

literature.<sup>31</sup> For example, Wedgwood observes that James might depict as many unhappy people as he likes, if only he would let us sympathize with them. In her essay on “Ethics and Literature,” she identifies this as a growing trend among novelists: “There is a different spirit in every writer of our day. Literature has turned from the study of ideals to the copy of any sufficiently distinct experience.” To mark the change, she notes that two or three decades ago George Eliot was considered the finest writer of fiction. Eliot “was steeped in scientific ideas, but the tone of appeal in her earlier works suggests a morality.”<sup>32</sup> But turning to George Meredith, the writer who is widely considered the current “laureate” of fiction, Wedgwood asserts:

nobody can say, in listening to him, that the thrill of the drama is combined with the edification of the sermon. The tone is that of the impartial demonstration, of a respect for fact as fact, of truth in this sense, not of moral claim but of science, of photography. George Meredith belongs wholly to this side of the great upheaval, of which the ‘Origin of Species’ marked the culminating point.<sup>33</sup>

Wedgwood never refers to Meredith as immoral, but rather as “non-moral.”<sup>34</sup> It is the total absence of viewpoint that strikes her as distinctly scientific.

She also detects this method in the fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson: “we have in his novels a tone of entire scientific impartiality; he describes good and bad in the same tones.”<sup>35</sup>

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31. Wedgwood, “Contemporary Records: Fiction” (December 1886), 900.

32. Wedgwood, “Ethics and Literature,” 64.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 65.

Although Wedgwood praises Stevenson's artistic skill in all his works, she regrets that he and so many other contemporary writers choose "general impartiality"—that is, "readiness to go out in every direction and put oneself in the place of everybody"—rather than "catholic sympathy," which she describes as "that habit of mind by which, in all relation, our attention is ready to pass from one set of claims to their opposites." She argues:

When literature exchanges the selective touch of morals for the collective grasp of science she abandons her true vocation. If she fail to supply a school of sympathy, and do not teach us to look at some characters more penetratingly than others, she leaves unfulfilled the office assigned to her in the noble words of Bacon—"to give the mind of Man some shadow of satisfaction, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul."<sup>36</sup>

The argument of "Ethics and Literature" reiterates the objection Wedgwood expressed to Browning almost thirty years before. In January 1869, she wrote to Browning, "It is, I suppose, the consistent dramatic feeling I quarrel with—this readiness to hold a brief for any character or feeling, so it is only individual, to work coldly out any problem, so that it is sufficiently complex without examining the premises."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Wedgwood's emphasis on selection, catholic sympathy, and point of view (that is, literature's ability to show what cannot be easily seen by anyone under the same conditions), and even her reference to Sir Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning*, are all present in her criticism of *The Ring and the Book*. Reading her letters to Browning in light of this later journalism places Wedgwood's moral response firmly in the debate of faith and science.

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36. Ibid., 68-69.

37. Curle, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, 158.

## The Great Battle

Browning sent Wedgwood the first half of his poem on November 5, 1868, and ten days later she prefaced her first reactions with a reference to his “scientific” perspective. She suggests that what he calls “the physiology of wrong”—she calls it a “scientific interest in evil”—is an “unduly prominent” interest for him.<sup>38</sup> As we have already seen in Wedgwood’s reviews and essays, she frequently contrasts science’s task of gathering all data to literature’s task of selection. What she sees in Browning’s poem is an error in selection, or what she also calls an improper balance of light and shade. She explains, “One’s memory seems filled by the despicable husband, the vulgar parents, the brutal cutthroats; the pathetic child is jostled into a corner... There is, what seems to me an absolute superfluity of detail in the hideous portraits.”<sup>39</sup> As she goes on to describe the imbalance she detects in the work, she eventually settles on a metaphor:

I well remember your speaking with strong dissent, with which I entirely sympathized, of that kind of moral science which thinks it can fill up the valleys without lowering the hills. I know the depth of the valleys *is* the height of the hills. I know that we can only discern the white against the black. But hatred and scorn of evil, though it be inseparable from the love of good, ought not surely to predominate over it?<sup>40</sup>

The metaphor of black and white is reiterated a few lines later when she writes, “You seem to me so to hunger for intensity that you lose the sense of proportion whenever you begin to lay

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38. Ibid., 137.

39. Ibid., 139.

40. Ibid., 137.

on dark shades.”<sup>41</sup> Her reference to Browning’s imbalance of black and white has been offered as one of the chief examples of her “moralizing” attitude, but when we consider it in the context of the juxtaposition of science and literature it takes on a different texture.

Wedgwood argues that whereas science has a duty to portray all data without imposing any individual point of view, fiction has a duty to select details that shape the story toward a greater truth. At the heart of Browning’s story, she believes, is an experience of pure and uplifting love.<sup>42</sup> Thus Wedgwood argues that his overuse of blackness mars his intention: “So much fringe of blackness as brings out [the white] we accept willingly. ...But surely, surely we have more of this than that small white figure can bear.”<sup>43</sup> Her letter continues with a reference to Sir Francis Bacon that, as we have seen, would reappear many times in her later journalism. She asks,

Do you remember Bacon’s description of the office of Poetry, in *The Advancement of Learning*?, ‘to satisfy the mind’ (I forget the exact words) by some shadow of a higher justice than any exhibited in actual life, ‘*the soul being so much greater than the world.*’ This is the element I long for more of in you.<sup>44</sup>

Bacon’s words help Wedgwood articulate her fundamental critical belief that literature aims at what is unknowable. Because she believes that literature’s “true function” is to “relieve the imagination” by revealing something beyond the failures of actual experience, Wedgwood is

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41. Ibid., 138.

42. “The picture of a fribble turned to a man...by his first contact with a pure spirit, the quick response to purity that begets trust, and that rarely felt, still more rarely conceived, emotion—the most refined, I think, of this earthly experience...—all these things, surely, form the core of what you have to say?” Ibid.

43. Ibid., 138-39.

44. Ibid., 138.

unmoved by Browning's reply that "the business has been, as I specify, to explain *fact*."<sup>45</sup> She wants him to aim *beyond* fact at what only he can show his readers.

Wedgwood's essays often treat popular literature as "an index to what we may call the *spirits*, as distinct from the *spirit*, of a particular time."<sup>46</sup> Time and again she argues that "Even the literature which has no aim but amusement, proclaims, in no uncertain voice, the influence of a national past."<sup>47</sup> For Wedgwood, today's literature bears the mark of past struggle, but it also acts as a force shaping future society for better or worse. Whereas science's influence is like that "of an instructor, enlarging the field of intellectual vision and bringing new facts to the storehouse of thought," Wedgwood argues that the critic's influence "suppl[ies] new logical machinery for the working up of these facts into theories."<sup>48</sup> Consequently, bad literature or literary criticism might engender more bad thinking for some time to come. Because Wedgwood viewed literature as a discourse for working out less tangible truths, or what might be considered questions of faith, the consequences of "an improper balance of light and shade" become even more dire. Indeed, we can now see that Julia Wedgwood's criticisms of *The Ring and the Book* are centered on the question of what

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45. Wedgwood, "Contemporary Records: Fiction" (May 1885), 754; Curle, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, 144. Browning's insistence that he meant to relay fact refers to the records of the seventeenth-century Italian court case which inspired his poem.

46. Wedgwood, "Contemporary Records: Fiction" (August 1886), 294.

47. Wedgwood, "Count Leo Tolstoi," 249.

48. Wedgwood, "A Study of Carlyle," 594.

sort of mental machinery, or point of view, Browning meant to provide and what evolutionary consequences it might have.

From Wedgwood's perspective, Browning offers a dark machinery for approaching the world. Though Browning says he portrays just the amount of blackness and whiteness that he sees in the world "as God made it," Wedgwood's objection more precisely articulates her dialectical hopes for literature:

I demur. Guido seems to me not at all to belong to the world, as God made it. While yet by a strange paradox that world w[oul]d be exactly the one where Art finds no foothold. It is along the boundary line that its path seems to me to lie—where the waters separate for the two great oceans; on whichever side that watershed is lost sight of, my interest fails.<sup>49</sup>

In describing the boundary of black and white, Wedgwood recalls the boundaries she outlined for science and moral philosophy. Just as she refuses to let moral beliefs limit the researches of science, and vice versa, she explains to Browning, "It is the struggle of the two elements, the edge of black and white, that seems to me to teach us the meaning of both. Your curious 'depth below depth of depravity' loses sight of this edge."<sup>50</sup> Wedgwood acknowledges in this letter—as she frequently does in her essays and reviews—that great art need not express a moral, but she also admits that she has high hopes for literature. Indeed, she recognizes the fine line her theory walks, anticipating the charge Curle would make decades later when she asks Browning:

Do I take too moral a view of the poet's duty? I know you hate this, and I believe I do too. But in this short life, where good fights at such terrible odds with evil—where God hides his face and the Devil shews his—I cannot feel

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49. Curle, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, 148.

50. *Ibid.*, 149.

that one of the greatest motive forces we have at our command may rightly act independently of the great battle.<sup>51</sup>

The “great battle” certainly refers to one between good and evil, but it also reflects Wedgwood’s dialectical view of literature (or moral thought) and science.<sup>52</sup> Whether Browning wants to acknowledge it or not, Wedgwood asserts that his poem wields an influence on the future spirit.

### **Against Hero Worship**

For Wedgwood, the influence of literature would become even more powerful in the absence of traditional religious orthodoxy. Wedgwood saw that the desire for an ultimate authority did not disappear along with the old dogma. She argued that people were all too eager to transfer faith from a flawed divine authority to an equally flawed secular authority. The “mere wish which forms so large a part of the faith of most people”—as she called it in her letter to Browning—took many forms.<sup>53</sup> It referred to blind and unquestioning religious faith, but it also pointed to its modern substitutes. She believed that people were searching for something to fill the void once occupied by religious faith, and that most of their new idols

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51. Ibid., 150.

52. It might also suggest connections to evolutionary struggle. The description of fiction as a “motive force” seems to echo Darwin’s theory. Although Wedgwood argues that literature and science are separate, her dialectical approach sometimes looks like an evolutionary theory of literature.

53. Curle, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, 9-10.

were poorly chosen. In “Fiction and Faith,” an 1892 essay for the *Contemporary Review*, she describes what has happened in the absence of the old faith:

When a tree has been cut down, many green shoots surround the truncated stem, and seem in their manifest growth and wealth of foliage to replace with richer life the central column whose trace they often hide. In like manner, when the central growth of faith is arrested, the rising sap of instinctive trust floods many lesser convictions, which for the same reason seem more real.<sup>54</sup>

Her survey of “the literature of the hour” suggests a number of “shoots” rising from the broken trunk of religious faith, and she takes Mary Augusta Ward’s *David Grieve* as an index of current popular faiths. In addition to “the enthusiasm for natural law inspired by science” (apparent in literary naturalism), she also sees a new “faith in human righteousness” (apparent in modern democracy and individualism) and a “new belief in those impulses which join man to woman” (apparent in legal efforts to make divorce easier as well as in franker depictions of sexuality in fiction).<sup>55</sup> Wedgwood is no convert to any of these religions.

She carefully demonstrates the limits of such new sources of faith, noting that science cannot explain all of human relations, democracy does not ensure social good, and individualism frequently ignores it altogether. Returning to her metaphor of the tree that’s been severed at the trunk, Wedgwood warns that it will take time for us to see what we have really exchanged the old growth for.<sup>56</sup> But if Wedgwood is reluctant to embrace any of these new ideologies, she is also wary of what she sees as Ward’s backward-looking conclusion.

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54. Wedgwood, “Fiction and Faith,” 218.

55. *Ibid.*

56. For a different reading, see Stevens, “Intertextual Constructions of Faith,” 85. Stevens argues that Wedgwood “locate[s] the special genius of Mrs. Humphrey Ward” in her “experiments in alternative faiths.” But this puts a happier spin on Wedgwood’s review than it

After allowing her hero to consider the new choices offered by a less orthodox society (which include sexual freedom), Ward's novel ultimately chooses the opposite extreme, "culminating in a marriage of tepid affection and diverse aim." While others say that Ward's picture of marriage should be heartening to moralists, Wedgwood disagrees because it represents "a return towards all that is narrow in the ideal of the past."<sup>57</sup> This review illustrates Wedgwood's unwillingness to stick with tradition as well as her reluctance to espouse a modern replacement.

Wedgwood was similarly dissatisfied with George Eliot's assertions about sympathy. While George Eliot and Anne Mozley, as we saw in Chapter Three, argue that sympathy leads to moral judgment, Wedgwood counters that this is not necessarily so. She explains,

The influence by which sympathy is widened and varied may be called moral in a certain sense, but this use of the word is an instance of that tendency to make an epithet descriptive of one good thing describe all good things, which seems to us one of the commonest sources of intellectual confusion. A great writer may be entirely moral in this sense, he may take the reader into a healthy moral atmosphere without stimulating, perhaps even while somewhat deadening, the judgment of right and wrong.<sup>58</sup>

Because sympathy does not necessarily lead to better judgment, Wedgwood does not believe that sympathy is the answer to all social problems, despite popular notions of the kind.<sup>59</sup>

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warrants. Stevens is correct that "Wedgwood believes that Ward's novels celebrate several new modes of postChristian [*sic*] faith," but Wedgwood doesn't think it's much of a celebration and, further, she thinks Ward is a second-rate artist.

57. Wedgwood, "Fiction and Faith," 223.

58. Wedgwood, "The Moral Influence of George Eliot," 175.

59. For more discussion of the popularity of this belief, see also "Contemporary Records: Fiction" (December 1886), 901.

What's more, she traces this belief to the new faith in individualism. As people begin to make the individual's life more important than the social good, sympathizing with one's fellow human beings takes on an almost religious connotation, according to Wedgwood. Indeed, she argues that people now infuse the relations of human to human with the same fervor they once applied to relations between humans and the divine. In "Contemporary Records: Fiction" for November 1885, Wedgwood points to the new attitude that elevates human love to fill the void left by divine love. She also sees this tendency in George Eliot's fiction, where human relations are elevated above reverence for God. She writes, "we think most of her readers will agree with us that, with few exceptions, human love is interesting in her pages in inverse proportion as it bears the impress of what is divine."<sup>60</sup> She goes on to say, "Something of mistake mixes in most upward-looking devotion as George Eliot paints it."<sup>61</sup>

We have seen how Wedgwood's distrust of modern replacements for religious orthodoxy leads her to criticize literature's use of scientific methods and to make her readers aware of their impulse to faith. I see both of these moves as part of Wedgwood's larger project to provide the oppositional discourse required by her dialectical theory. As she theorizes in *The Moral Ideal*,

Every perplexity which has deeply stirred the human heart seems to need two opposite answers; and for finite beings Truth seems to involve contradiction between them. We spring from any single vision to one supplying a diverse element of thought; there is no conviction that will not become error if, in our

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60. Wedgwood, "The Moral Influence of George Eliot," 182.

61. *Ibid.*, 183.

attention to it, we stiffen into immobility and lose the palpitating throb, which is indeed the very pulse of mental life.<sup>62</sup>

Although literature can provide a necessary venue for moral discourse, it also has the potential to become as deadened as the old orthodoxy, or as misleading as the other new secular gods, if we accept it uncritically. Thus, Wedgwood's criticism habitually examines the limitations and inconsistencies of writers and their fictional or critical theories. To put it another way, she does her best to undermine the sort of hero worship that Carlyle had preached earlier in the century.

Carlyle, perhaps appropriately as the originator of this theory, takes the brunt of it. In "A Study of Carlyle" (1881), she explains: "The belief in the inspiration of humanity is the strength of Carlyle's creed. The belief in inspired men is its weakness."<sup>63</sup> Wedgwood appreciated the way that Carlyle's theory of the "hero as man of letters" united literary discourse with the language of faith. After all, she sees literary discourse as a repository for the kind of thinking faith requires: the kind that strives toward the unknowable. The problem with hero worship was that it encouraged people to rest their faith in the writer's authority, or in other words, to rely on one discourse rather than the dialectical relationship between multiple discourses. "A Study of Carlyle" appeared in the April 1881 issue of the *Contemporary Review*, and though it had only been two months since Carlyle's death, Julia Wedgwood devotes considerable attention to the sage's unheroic qualities. Partly a response to James Anthony Froude's publication of Carlyle's *Reminiscences*, Wedgwood explains that

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62. Wedgwood, *The Moral Ideal*, 463.

63. Wedgwood, "A Study of Carlyle," 596.

her goal is to offer a “balanced” assessment of Carlyle’s career. Like many others, Wedgwood believed that Froude had revealed too much and should have withheld some of those reminiscences to protect both Carlyle and the reputations of the many people he maligned. Here we see again her emphasis on selection and reserve, as she tries to correct some of the damage of what she considers Froude’s unbalanced presentation. Wedgwood faults both Carlyle and Froude for lacking reserve. She describes the responsibility of both biography and criticism when she explains, “A study of any human character is full of interest, and the light and shade must be taken together, but a mere allusion should be either kindly, or absolutely indispensable.”<sup>64</sup> That is, if one offers a negative observation about a person or a work of literature, it should be given in its full context to ensure a balanced and true portrait. Indeed, outside of balancing context the observation loses its truthfulness, as she suggests in her discussion of Carlyle’s judgment of Sir Walter Scott.

Several years before she took up the task of defending the various subjects of Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, Wedgwood had found herself on the other side of Carlyle’s criticism of Scott. In her 1878 essay, “Sir Walter Scott and the Romantic Reaction,” ostensibly a review of R.H. Hutton’s contribution to the English Men of Letters series, Wedgwood positions Hutton’s book as a protest to Carlyle’s charge of “vulgar worldliness.”<sup>65</sup> Carlyle’s low estimate of Scott, she says, would lead us to “suppose him to be a mere manufacturer of well-paid literary luxuries for the fashionable and indolent... a mere lover of the world’s high places and clever earner of

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64. *Ibid.*, 587.

65. Quoted in Wedgwood, “Sir Walter Scott and the Romantic Reaction,” 517.

the needful means of winning them.<sup>66</sup> As in the later articles, Wedgwood claims to offer a balanced view. Thus, she explains that “to protest against any injustice with effect we must recognize the fibre of truth, apart from which injustice has no coherence.”<sup>67</sup> Wedgwood allows that Scott did have worldly interests, particularly to see his family ascend in social prominence. But she asserts that there are different kinds of worldliness, and that unlike base greed, for example, the desire to see one’s family rise in nobility could not be so scornfully mocked. Wedgwood’s advice should not be interpreted as the cliché that one should say something nice or say nothing at all, for she argues that unqualified praise is misleading (though she admits that uncritical praise at least does less harm). Indeed, her quarterly omnibus reviews for the *Contemporary* are characterized by a great deal of fault finding. Few works escape without a qualification to her praise, and more often her judgments focus on what is less pleasing only to finish with a nod to what succeeds.

It seems that the inordinate amount of harm caused by Froude and Carlyle led Wedgwood to make a frequent example of the two. Indeed, Wedgwood got a lot of mileage out of what became known as the Froude-Carlyle controversy. After contributing “A Study of Carlyle” under a pseudonym in April, she wrote a signed article for the next month’s number entitled “Mr. Froude as a Biographer,” in which she covers much the same territory, although

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66. Wedgwood, “Sir Walter Scott and the Romantic Reaction,” 516.

67. *Ibid.*

this article focuses more on vindicating some of those people whom Carlyle had defamed.<sup>68</sup> As late as 1889, she was still pointing to Carlyle's unjust criticisms. In an essay about "The Cambridge Apostles of 1830," she compares the account of Mrs. Sterling in Carlyle's *Life of Sterling* to the one found in the recently published letters and memorials of Archbishop Trench. She explains, "Carlyle's 'authority' is not, to those who best knew Mrs. Sterling, sufficiently free from doubt to outweigh their impression of her character, and he is besides inconsistent with the account of the same circumstances given correctly by the earlier biographer and older friend."<sup>69</sup> Wedgwood brings the heroic man of letters back down to earth by subjecting his arguments to comparison with other authoritative sources. Finding him incorrect in the case of Mrs. Sterling, Wedgwood urges her audience to consider that Carlyle's judgments might also have been ill-founded in other cases (certainly, this is another allusion to the *Reminiscences*).

Wedgwood is attuned to the ways that authority becomes its own justification and disables the important faculty of doubt. Even as she tries to excuse some of Carlyle's harshness as a result of his aged and "diseased mind," she nevertheless asserts that Carlyle's apologists make too many concessions for a man of genius.<sup>70</sup> She does not reject Carlyle's claims to genius; she only asserts that geniuses and "great men" are not by the same token

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68. The pseudonym could not have been seriously meant to shield her identity, since she uses so many of the same arguments and even some of the exact same phrases in the signed article.

69. Wedgwood, "The Cambridge Apostles," 139.

70. Wedgwood, "Mr. Froude as a Biographer," 828.

“good men.” She raises a similar issue in “The Moral Influence of George Eliot” when she observes, “She was one of the few whose words are mightier than their actions.”<sup>71</sup> The implication is that although George Eliot’s relationship with the married George Henry Lewes was widely known, her fiction was still warmly received and often considered highly moral. Wedgwood agrees that George Eliot is a moral teacher—she describes her best work as combining the finest artistic talent with the power of preaching—but she is perplexed by the public’s refusal to see George Eliot clearly. Noting that some of George Eliot’s admirers try to “conceal, from themselves or others, the vacuum at the centre of her faith,” Wedgwood devotes considerable space to demonstrating that although “her teaching impresses on the mind the excellence of patient work, of simple duty, of cheerful unselfishness” nevertheless we must “allow that she failed to inspire equal sympathy with aspiration, that she painted reverence...as generally mistaken.”<sup>72</sup> Overall, the essay is effusively appreciative, but Wedgwood once again includes more criticism than one might expect to find in what is essentially a memorial. George Eliot died December 22, 1880, and Wedgwood’s essay ran in the February 1881 issue of the *Contemporary*. As in her “Study of Carlyle,” Wedgwood approaches the memorial, the genre that might be most inclined toward hero worship, by carefully attempting to balance light and shade.

Wedgwood’s insistence on a balanced picture of authors’ lives arose from her concern about the record literature would leave for posterity and how that literary record might

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71. Wedgwood, “The Moral Influence of George Eliot,” 179.

72. *Ibid.*, 181, 178.

influence future thought. As we have seen, she was attuned to the kind of authority the critic or novelist might wield on an audience. Wedgwood believed that the man or woman of letters, especially those with as much influence as Carlyle or George Eliot—or Robert Browning—had to be careful not to mislead people who put their faith in them. She makes this clear when, in contemplating Carlyle’s portrayal of Scott, she suggests the possible damage:

An intelligent Frenchman or German wishing to gain some knowledge of English literature, and studying for that purpose the ‘Miscellanies’ of our great critic, would, we imagine, come to the conclusion that it was mere waste of time...to make himself acquainted with Scott.<sup>73</sup>

More important than the damage to a single author’s reputation, such criticism left faulty critical machinery as its legacy.

Similarly, this chapter has tried to offer a more balanced view of Julia Wedgwood’s literary criticism, not simply to repair the damage to this individual author’s reputation, but to reveal some of the faulty critical machinery that leads scholars to believe it would be a “mere waste of time” to make ourselves acquainted with her work. I have suggested that early twentieth-century reviewers were guilty of their own hero worship, punishing Wedgwood for daring to critique the great poet Browning. Reviews of the published letters seem outraged that such an obscure woman should not only fail to worship the hero’s poem, but also perhaps to reject the hero himself.<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, biographical sources indicate that Wedgwood herself was all too prone to hero worship. Her sister Effie described her as having a “tendency

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73. Wedgwood, “Sir Walter Scott and the Romantic Reaction,” 519.

74. *Commonweal*’s reviewer doggedly refutes Curle’s suggestion that Browning’s feelings might have been more ardent than the lady’s. Reilly seems to recognize Wedgwood’s

towards idolatry,” and Barbara and Hensleigh Wedgwood argue in their history of *The Wedgwood Circle* that Julia “was hopelessly in love not only with the man Browning but with the myth that surrounded him.”<sup>75</sup> But Wedgwood and Browning’s disagreement about the function of poetry must have impressed upon her a sound warning. She had placed complete faith in Browning’s poetic ability, so his decision to focus, obsessively as she saw it, on the worst in humanity was a perplexing disappointment. Whether or not this personal experience fueled her literary efforts to undermine hero worship, it is clear that the roots of Wedgwood’s critical theory begin at an earlier place, in her deeply intellectual engagement with Victorian scientific and theological arguments, and the conflict of faith and doubt. Richard Curle may have recognized this as he edited the Wedgwood-Browning correspondence, but a different sort of hero worship seems to have skewed his judgment of Wedgwood. He notes that her obituary notices are “the kind...which are written about people who have outlived their fame.” And lest the reader think that Julia Wedgwood had ever been important in her own right, he adds, “Not that she ever had much fame, but that, in her middle years, she did fill a distinct, small niche in the moral, rather than the artistic, world of the last century.”<sup>76</sup> Curle’s mistake, I would argue, is in assuming that the artistic mattered more than the moral in the “world of the

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critical skill but undercuts her with a personal attack: “Miss Wedgwood had intellectual honesty and critical judgment; what she needed was something even more important, something which, for want of a better term, may be called tact.” “Romance and Letters,” 527.

75. Wedgwood and Wedgwood, *The Wedgwood Circle*, 277, 280.

76. Curle, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, xxii.

last century.” The label “moral” is an accurate one for Wedgwood, but we do well to remember that art and morality were not yet antithetical while Wedgwood was writing.

The critical machinery Wedgwood tried to offer was the conviction that, as the “other of science,” literature could provide a field of moral inquiry. But more importantly, through her dialectical approach, she advocated a rigorous critical doubt. Wedgwood seems to prefer an ongoing conflict between orthodoxy and innovation, rather than the triumph of either. Her effort to recognize these conflicting discourses is reflected in her argument that “Only literature with its disentangling touch brings before us so vividly the opposing forces, ranges their serried ranks in such definite antagonism, that the very nakedness of the problem forced on our attention gives it a certain solution.”<sup>77</sup> The suggestion of a solution does not usually figure in her discussions of faith and doubt, but this assertion reminds us of the endpoint of any dialectical system. In “The Boundaries of Science,” Wedgwood holds out the hope that someday science and religion will corroborate one another: “No doubt all the lines of Truth converge, but it is at too small an angle, and too fast a distance, for us to be able in all cases to perceive the tendency to unite.”<sup>78</sup> This forward-looking element of Wedgwood’s criticism justifies her argument for toggling between perspectives: it works because it assumes that eventually all will be resolved and the validity of both discourses will become apparent (even if that resolution can only happen when creation finishes). The hopefulness of this theory makes it easy to understand how Julia Wedgwood’s criticisms of *The Ring and the Book* have

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77. Wedgwood, “Ethics and Literature,” 79-80.

78. Wedgwood, “The Boundaries of Science,” 135.

been dismissed as moralizing, yet her moral goal obscures the very interesting fact that Julia Wedgwood does more to promote the critical spirit than many other critics.

## Chapter 5

### “Links to the Past”: Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Tradition, and the Woman Critic

Anne Thackeray Ritchie (1837-1919) was a novelist, biographer, essayist, and critic whose life spanned the entirety of Victoria’s reign, the Edwardian years, and the First World War. Her father, the novelist and humorist William Makepeace Thackeray, encouraged her first publication in 1860 in the *Cornhill Magazine*, of which he was then editor. And after his death in 1863, the twenty-six-year-old Anne Thackeray went on to build a successful literary career of her own. Her essays were published in periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, including *Macmillan’s*, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, and *St. Nicholas*, in addition to the *Cornhill*. She published seven works of fiction and eight works of non-fiction including biography, memoirs, and collections of essays. In 1875, Smith, Elder, and Company published an eight-volume set of *The Works of Miss Thackeray*, and in 1886 Tauchnitz reprinted an expanded fifteen-volume edition. George Eliot confessed that she knew “nothing of our contemporary English novelists with the exception of Miss Thackeray’s and (a few of) Anthony Trollope’s works.”<sup>1</sup> And in “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James cited Ritchie’s work as an example of his ideal. But despite these achievements and accolades, Ritchie’s reputation among scholars today is minor, at best. Indeed, when critics do consider Anne Thackeray

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1. Eliot to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, 13 November 1877, in *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 6, 418.

Ritchie, they almost always view her in the shadow of her father. As Thackeray's daughter, Ritchie has been stereotyped as keeper of the flame and chronicler of her father's generation.<sup>2</sup>

This view of Ritchie has its roots in the obituaries that followed her death in 1919. Writing for the the *Times Literary Supplement*, her step-niece Virginia Woolf describes Ritchie's task as "recording the great and small figures of her own past."<sup>3</sup> Even her seeming praise that Ritchie would be "the transparent medium through which we behold the dead" minimizes Ritchie's active role as an author. And her conclusion solidifies the perception that Ritchie's primary role is as Thackeray's daughter, for she proclaims, "Above all and forever she will be the companion and interpreter of her father, whose spirit she has made to walk among us not only because she wrote of him, but because even more wonderfully she lived in him."<sup>4</sup> Leonard Woolf makes a similar move in his obituary for *The Times*, qualifying his praise by concluding that "it was rather in her life and personality that the wayward spirit of genius showed itself."<sup>5</sup> A look over twentieth-century scholarship on Ritchie confirms that most critics still cannot resist tying Anne Thackeray Ritchie's works and reputation to her father or

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2. See Leonard Woolf's obituary for *The Times*, "Death of Lady Ritchie, Thackeray's Daughter"; Hester Thackeray Ritchie Fuller's memoir of her mother, *Thackeray's Daughter*, as well as her collection of letters entitled *Thackeray and His Daughter*; Naomi Lewis's essay "Thackeray's Daughter" (1957).

3. Woolf, "Lady Ritchie," 123. Leslie Stephen's first wife was Minny Thackeray, Anne's younger sister who died in 1875. In 1878 Leslie was married to Julia Duckworth, with whom he had four children including Virginia. Anne Thackeray, later Mrs. Richmond Ritchie, remained close to the Stephens.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Woolf, "Death of Lady Ritchie, Thackeray's Daughter," 13.

his contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> The same gendered discourses that circumscribed Victorian women's writing to certain genres and their social use to the private sphere have continued to operate on Anne Ritchie's reputation up to the present. The trials of recovering Ritchie in the later twentieth- and early twenty-first-century reveal a larger problem in recognizing Victorian women critics. Studying Ritchie's letters, Carol Hanbery MacKay argues, "if we had nothing more than her letters and diaries to judge her by, Anne Thackeray Ritchie would still stand out from her contemporaries as someone who chronicled the passing of several generations and penetrated their unique personalities."<sup>7</sup> But I would argue that when we look at Anne Thackeray Ritchie's published essays and criticism, we cannot see her as a mere chronicler. Ritchie does not simply record, but rather reshapes the histories she presents.

So while I, admittedly, also focus on Anne Ritchie's use of her father's works and memory, I do so to demonstrate how Ritchie's work stands in its own right. Certainly, Ritchie cultivated her role as a "link to the past"—she even gave this title to one of her later essays for the *Cornhill*.<sup>8</sup> She also wrote the biographical introductions to her father's complete works, as

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6. Ove Jacob Hjort Preus's 1959 dissertation considers "Anne Ritchie and the Victorian Literary Aristocracy"; Part I of Winifred Gérin's 1981 biography is entitled "Thackeray's Daughter" and accounts for more than half the text; John Aplin, *"A True Affection": Anne Thackeray Ritchie and the Tennysons* (2006); Elisabeth Jay, "In her father's steps she trod': Anne Thackeray Ritchie Imagining Paris." There has also been a vogue for portraying Ritchie as a modernist by tying her to her step-niece, Virginia Woolf.

7. MacKay, "Only Connect," 95.

8. The phrase comes from her essay "Blackstick No. 7: Links to the Past," which I discuss later in this chapter, but it also appears in others' comments about her. Leonard Woolf uses the term in the opening sentence of his obituary for Ritchie. MacKay writes that "Ritchie went on to serve as a link between generations." "Only Connect," 83.

well as numerous biographical essays and memoirs comprised by collections like *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning* and *Chapters from Some Memoirs*. But Ritchie was no mere peddler of nostalgia, and we make quite a mistake if we assume that she acts simply as a conduit to the past or a transparent medium for reincarnating the dead. Indeed, we must consider what specific parts of the past Ritchie hopes to link with and, more importantly, what results might be desirable from such a link. I argue that, for Anne Ritchie, the critic's job is to provide a narrative that reconciles the present with the past in order to forward her progressive agenda. Thus, Ritchie's use of the past in her critical essays is always dynamic: by adopting what she calls a "double point of view," Ritchie reshapes the past for her readers, often in support of progressive change in matters both literary and social. This double point of view allows her to use the past—including references to her father and his works—to challenge the discourses that limit women's critical authority. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the double point of view appears throughout Ritchie's oeuvre and then focus particularly on how it operates in the *Blackstick Papers*, her early-twentieth-century series that takes its name from one of William Makepeace Thackeray's characters. In addition to complicating the stereotype of "Thackeray's daughter," these essays help us to better understand how women critics negotiated the past and the topos of *tradition* to support progressive causes including women's authorship and women's education.

Anne Ritchie has not been given much attention as a critic, and I suggest this has a lot to do with her immediate context—the *Cornhill Magazine*. Most scholars agree that the *Cornhill* was for the most part exceptionally welcoming to women writers. Janice Harris estimates that between 1860 and 1900 women writers account for about 20% of the *Cornhill*'s

contributors.<sup>9</sup> During high points in the 1860s and 1870s, the number of women contributors in a single issue might be as high as 60 or 70 percent. But even though the magazine offered women unprecedented opportunities to contribute fiction, it never positioned its women contributors as critics. The magazine regularly published articles commenting on literature, and it was home to some of the century's most impressive critical essays, including John Ruskin's "Unto this Last" and Matthew Arnold's "The Literary Influence of Academies," "Culture and Its Enemies," "Anarchy and Authority," and "Literature and Dogma."<sup>10</sup> But the *Cornhill* never ran the sort of recurring review column that *Blackwood's* did with Margaret Oliphant's "New Novels" or the *Contemporary Review's* "Contemporary Records" or even the *Westminster Review's* "Belles Lettres" column. When the *Cornhill* did run a critical series on literature—such as George Henry Lewes's "Notes on Literature and Science" or Leslie Stephen's "Hours in a Library"—it was sure to be written by a man. By the first decade of the twentieth century when Ritchie was publishing her series of *Blackstick Papers*, the situation was much the same.

The *Cornhill's* unique editorial style also does much to obscure the critical bent of Ritchie's work. As Jennifer Phegley has observed in her study of the *Cornhill* during the 1860s and 1870s, "The use of techniques such as humor, dream sequences, and fictionalized dialogues in [the magazine's] serious articles buffer controversial points of view about

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9. Harris, "Not Suffering and Not Still," 385.

10. Ruskin, "Unto this Last" (August-November 1860); Arnold, "The Literary Influence of the Academies" (August 1864); "Culture and Its Enemies" (July 1867), "Anarchy and Authority" (January, February, June-August 1868), and "Literature and Dogma" (July & October 1871).

women's proper roles in society and teach without preaching."<sup>11</sup> This observation is confirmed by Ritchie's oeuvre, for if her touch was light, her subject matter was often quite serious. So those who are accustomed to viewing Ritchie as a writer of light literature may be surprised to observe that her essays demonstrate a running engagement not only with literature and book culture but also feminist issues such as women's employment and education. Phegley has argued persuasively that "[b]y describing its own realistic novels as 'factual fiction' and using fictional techniques such as dream sequences and dialogues within its factual articles, the magazine employed fact and fiction in dialogical ways," but I would also like to draw attention to how Anne Ritchie used those techniques to create other dialogical relationships—between present and past, and between progress and tradition.<sup>12</sup>

The perception of Anne Thackeray Ritchie as a link to the past rests largely on her writing about her father and his generation of literary friends. But long before she took up the biographer's pen, Ritchie was using her criticism to dialogue with the past. Indeed, her May 1865 essay, "Heroines and Their Grandmothers," attempts to do that quite literally by imagining how the female characters of dead novelists like Jane Austen, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Ann Radcliffe would react to meeting their literary granddaughters, the heroines of contemporary novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Aurora Floyd*, *Middlemarch*, *North and South*, or *The Daisy Chain*. Although the essay refers to Elizabeth Bennett and the others as "grandmothers," these characters appear as young as ever. (Ritchie even imagines that "Fanny

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11. Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*, 104.

12. *Ibid.*, 78.

Price would turn scarlet and stop her little ears.”<sup>13</sup>) These reincarnated heroines are just one instance of a recurring figure in Ritchie’s non-fiction—the paradoxically youthful old woman. This figure focalizes Ritchie’s dynamic connection of past and present, and she appears time and again in Ritchie’s criticism for the *Cornhill Magazine*. For example, her March 1861 essay “Toilers and Spinsters” reminds us that an “old maid” might in fact be rather young. The women whom Ritchie calls “sibyls”—drawing on the ancient figure of the female prophet—are dead women writers from the previous generation whose influence lives on.<sup>14</sup> And the Fairy Blackstick, who gives her name to Ritchie’s early twentieth-century *Blackstick Papers*, is said to be some “ten or twenty thousand years” old, yet Ritchie reincarnates her as a speaking character and traveling companion. And this reincarnation is not mere prestidigitation; it is performed to show how the virtues embodied by Ritchie’s young old women can serve as practical models of progress for women.

Blackstick is an especially interesting example because she was originally a character in William Makepeace Thackeray’s 1855 Christmas book, *The Rose and the Ring*, and in that way she reminds readers of Anne Thackeray Ritchie’s own connection to a past that included her father and his generation of friends. In a sense, Ritchie assumes the persona of a youthful old woman in every memoir where she summons the ghost of her young self to recall

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13. Ritchie, “Heroines and Their Grandmothers,” 630.

14. Her essays on Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Amelia Opie, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen were collected as *A Book of Sibyls* in 1883; in 1912, Ritchie’s presidential address to the English Association, “A Discourse on Modern Sibyls,” pays tribute to more recently deceased women writers including Margaret Oliphant, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell.

vignettes of people like the Carlyles, Charlotte Brontë, Ruskin, the Brownings, the Tennysons, and, of course, her father. The strategy was a success, for most of Ritchie's biographers bought fully into this persona and helped enshrine Lady Ritchie herself as youthful even in her older age. We might dismiss the claim, coming from her daughter, that "Age neither dimmed nor limited her outlook," but many of Ritchie's contemporaries echo the sentiment.<sup>15</sup> Her friend Howard Sturgis credited her with "the eternal youth of genius"; the 1927 entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* refers to her "lasting youthfulness"; and Winifred Gérin's 1981 biography describes Ritchie as "young for her age."<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, some of these remarks attempt to account for Ritchie's marriage to a man seventeen years her junior. Thus, we also find descriptions of Richmond Ritchie, Anne Thackeray's second cousin and husband, as mature for his age.<sup>17</sup> But the notion that Lady Ritchie combined youth and age goes beyond the question of her unusual marriage. If that were the only explanation, these comments would always highlight Ritchie's youthful qualities. In fact, her age is equally important. Thus, Virginia Woolf asserts in her obituary that the hopeful sentiment present in so much of Ritchie's writing is tempered by "the shrewd, witty judgment of a woman of the world [who]

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15. Fuller and Hammersley, *Thackeray's Daughter*, 177.

16. Sturgis quoted in Fuller and Hammersley, 150; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (archive), s.v. "Ritchie, Sir Richmond Thackeray Willoughby (1854–1912), civil servant," by S.V. Fitz-Gerald; Gérin, *Anne Thackeray Ritchie*, 184.

17. The 1927 *DNB* entry states: "the marriage was a very happy one, the disparity in their ages being made up for by the early maturity of her husband's character and the lasting youthfulness of her own." Such accounts seem to suggest that Anne's being a late bloomer and Richmond's being born "old" allowed the two to meet in the middle.

smiles constantly upon her own rosy prospects.”<sup>18</sup> I, too, am interested in how Ritchie combined the perspectives of shrewd experience and youthful enthusiasm, particularly in her criticism. By situating herself this way—janus-like, looking both backward and forward—Ritchie becomes one of the most important of her paradoxically young old women. This paradoxical self-characterization, I argue, allows Ritchie to embody her “double point of view” and shows her as far more than a “transparent medium” to the past.

If we look at “Toilers and Spinsters”—one of her earliest essays for the *Cornhill*—we see that Ritchie is attuned to how images of women are constructed for public consumption. In this essay she takes on the popular character of “Old Maids, spinsters, the solitary, heart-broken women of England.” Ritchie demonstrates the gap between image and reality by pondering the intellectual pursuits open to unmarried women. With sharp wit, she asks, “Does Mudie refuse their subscriptions? Are they prevented from taking in the Times...?” As she continues this line of questioning, Ritchie undercuts the stereotypical character of the spinster and gradually rebuilds it to more closely resemble its masculine counterpart: “May not spinsters, as well as bachelors, give their opinions on every subject, no matter how ignorant they may be; travel about anywhere...; climb up craters, publish their experiences, tame horses, wear pork-pie hats, write articles for the *Saturday Review*?”<sup>19</sup> She might well have said, “write articles for the *Cornhill*,” for this is where Anne Thackeray got her start in 1860 under her father’s editorship. And indeed, it is worth noting that *Miss* Thackeray was only 24

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18. Woolf, “Lady Ritchie,” 123.

19. Ritchie, “Toilers and Spinsters,” 319.

when she wrote “Toilers and Spinsters,” though her anonymity allows her to adopt a vehemence that suggests identification with the group. Later, when Ritchie revised and updated this essay in 1874 to be published in a collection bearing her name, she identified a career-long preoccupation of her criticism by referring to the article as “written from its double point of view and from the two ends of fifteen years.”<sup>20</sup> Ritchie acknowledges how her revising self brings a new perspective to the essay, and I see this double perspective throughout her work.

In “Heroines and Their Grandmothers,” for example, Ritchie adopts a “double point of view” to consider, once again, how characters shape the public perception of women. Ritchie is still unsigned in 1865 (the *Cornhill* did not begin including signatures until 1880), and that anonymity allows her to align herself with the older generation. Thus, she expresses a preference for the controlled feeling of Jane Austen’s heroines over the excessively emotional heroines of contemporary novels, even though she herself is a producer of contemporary novels. Indeed, in her revision of the essay for the 1874 collection, Ritchie intensifies her dual perspective by including one of her own heroines, Dolly Vanborough of *Old Kensington* (1873), as an example of one of these “modern heroines with all their workings and deep feelings and unrequited affections.”<sup>21</sup> As has already been mentioned, Ritchie also uses a double point of view in imagining these fictional characters—who remain forever young within their novels—as the un-aged grandmothers to future heroines. Ritchie exploits the

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20. Ritchie, *Toilers and Spinsters and Other Essays*, 24.

21. *Ibid.*, 73.

paradoxical nature of these literary grandmothers to destabilize the image of women offered by fictional texts. She asks,

Are the former heroines women as they were, or as they were supposed to be in those days? Are the women of whom women write now, women as they are, or women as they are supposed to be? Does our modern taste demand a certain sensation feeling, sensation sentiment, only because it is actually experienced?"<sup>22</sup>

She leaves the question "to be answered on some other occasion," but it is not the answer that matters so much as the question itself. These youthful "grandmothers" provide a frame for interrogating the cultural contexts of women's fiction and women's lives.

Ritchie continues to frame questions about women's intellectual authority through an ambiguously aged female character in her *Blackstick Papers*, which appeared intermittently in the *Cornhill* between December 1900 and June 1907. Her introduction to the first essay in the series begins: "Readers of my father's works will be familiar with the name of the Fairy Blackstick who lived in Crim Tartary some ten or twenty thousand years ago."<sup>23</sup> With this wealth of experience, the Fairy Blackstick embodies many of the traits associated with Ritchie's other young old woman characters—including wisdom, the power to influence, and an interest in education—and she allows Ritchie to take a larger perspective and draw contrasts between past and present. But because Blackstick was originally William Makepeace Thackeray's creation, she also signals a link to the more recent past. By the end of 1900, Ritchie's introductions to the Biographical Edition of Thackeray's collected works had all been

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22. Ritchie, "Heroines and Their Grandmothers," 630.

23. Ritchie, "Blackstick Paper No. 1," 721.

published.<sup>24</sup> Having found great success as her father's ambassador to a new generation of readers, Ritchie understandably might be tempted to borrow one of his characters to frame her new series of essays. So unlike her references to Jane Austen's heroines or any of the other figures we have examined so far, her decision to invoke Blackstick clearly draws on Ritchie's fame as Thackeray's daughter and works to position her as the other famous character in these essays. By placing her series of Blackstick Papers "under the kindly tutelage of the good fairy of the 'Rose and the Ring,'" Ritchie reminds her readers of the half-century between her father's tale and her own.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Ritchie's memories bring the story to life again, along with the young Anny who was entertained by it as a child. Thus, the reference places Ritchie simultaneously in the present and the past, marking her as both old and young, the narrator of and a character within her own story.

Given that the force of character is one of Ritchie's favored methods of establishing authority, it stands to reason that she would exploit her own character as Thackeray's daughter to influence her readers. The various editors of the *Cornhill* from 1896 onward seem to have recognized this appeal of Ritchie's persona. When the magazine was failing at the end of the century, John St. Loe Strachey commissioned her to write "The First Number of *The Cornhill*" for the July 1896 issue in the hopes that her celebrity as daughter of the *Cornhill*'s first and most famous editor would "recapture something of the old glamor."<sup>26</sup> And after Reginald

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24. Ritchie began writing the biographical introductions in 1894, and they appeared monthly at the beginning of successive volumes, starting in 1898 and finishing in 1899.

25. Ritchie, "Blackstick Paper No. 1," 722.

26. *The Wellesley Index*, 323.

Smith became editor in 1898, he invited Lady Ritchie to contribute regularly to the magazine once again. But biographers who see Ritchie as a keeper of the Thackeray tradition often miss the complex ways in which she benefitted from readers' confidence in that persona. Readers may have turned to Ritchie nostalgically looking for those familiar references to Thackeray's works, but the fact is that Ritchie took liberties with her father's texts in pursuit of her own agenda. A small but important example is Blackstick's age: the Fairy's "ten or twenty thousand years of experience" seem to be Ritchie's invention entirely. Thackeray's illustration of Blackstick from the 1855 edition of *The Rose and the Ring* portrays a young woman. She has dark hair, not gray, and her posture is slim and straight, not stooped. Thackeray includes only one other illustration of the Fairy, and here she is disguised as "a very ordinary, vulgar-looking woman" asking for a place in the same coach in which Prince Giglio is traveling. Though less grand, this woman is certainly no older than the first: once again, dark hair, smooth face. Indeed, Thackeray's text even states that "the young woman was informed that if she wished to travel, she must go upon the roof."<sup>27</sup> And while one might argue that, as supernatural beings, fairies do not necessarily age, what is significant is that Anne Ritchie's characterization emphasizes the age that is not physically apparent. As with Ritchie's other characters of old women, she must introduce Blackstick's age—though *The Rose and the Ring* does not include this detail—in order to bring her vitality and her openness to new experiences into sharper focus.

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27. Thackeray, *The Rose and the Ring*, 84.

As we have seen already, the double perspective Ritchie constructs for herself combines the experience of age with youthful enthusiasm. So her use of the past—in this case, her father’s text—is paradoxically original because it involves revision and reinvention. Here as elsewhere, Ritchie’s use of the past hardly represents the “chronicling” and “recording” that scholars have attributed to her.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, though she borrows familiar materials, Ritchie makes her own original use of them. It turns out that her task is not so much to protect the tradition as to manipulate it into something new, and the *Blackstick Papers* offer numerous examples of this.

Ritchie coaxes her readers to reinterpret her father’s story by introducing details from earlier manuscripts of *The Rose and the Ring*. Ritchie informs her readers in the first Blackstick Paper that “In the manuscripts of the ‘Rose and the Ring’ there was originally a rival fairy...called Fairy Hopstick... [who] used to wheedle, and flatter, and tell lies.”<sup>29</sup> This sort of detail, of course, could only be provided by Thackeray’s daughter. And she had already revealed this anecdote and many others in her biographical introductions to her father’s works.<sup>30</sup> Ritchie’s ability to convey such information has contributed to the misperception that

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28. Virginia Woolf’s obituary describes Ritchie as “recording the great and small figures of her own past.” “Lady Ritchie,” 123. MacKay speaks of Ritchie as “preserving” her father’s work, “Guarding the flame for her famous father,” “someone who chronicled the passing of several generations,” and she refers to Ritchie’s “recording and linking aspects.” “Only connect,” 89, 90, 95, 97.

29. Ritchie, “Blackstick Paper No. 1,” 721-22.

30. One of the illustrations added to Ritchie’s revised introductions to the Centenary Edition of her father’s works in 1911 shows a version of the rival fairy, but there she is called Crookstick. So while readers of this Blackstick Paper in December 1900 could have read her biographical introduction to *The Rose and the Ring*, they would not have seen this image yet.

she is merely her father's historian or the curator of the Thackeray tradition, but Ritchie has good reasons of her own beyond historical motives for resurrecting Hopstick. As a flatterer, Hopstick promotes misleading ideas that people want to believe, and thus makes it more difficult for them to perceive the truth. In this way, she embodies the stereotypes of women that Ritchie's criticism consistently targets. Just as Ritchie exposes the false image of the heart-broken spinster in "Toilers and Spinsters" and denaturalizes contemporary fiction's excessively emotional women in "Heroines and Their Grandmothers," she tells us that Hopstick "seemed to shrivel up and disappear altogether under [Blackstick's] sincere and searching glances."<sup>31</sup> Ritchie reincarnates Hopstick so that she can erase her again, exclaiming, "She will not be missed, and Heaven forbid that anyone should have to read, or anyone else have to write, a series of Hopstick essays!"<sup>32</sup> Although Ritchie states that she is not sure why her father lost interest in following the career of Hopstick, she re-enacts the blotting out not merely for the sake of artistic revision, but as an act of social reform.

Besides introducing apocryphal details, Ritchie modifies our understanding of *The Rose and the Ring* by cherry-picking its themes and repositioning Blackstick as the central character. In *The Rose and the Ring*, Blackstick is a sort of fairy godmother to the royal families of Crim Tartary and its neighbors, and her role is more active in the backstory. We are told initially that, after years of bestowing magic roses, rings, and the like upon these ungrateful royals, Blackstick rethinks her strategy and decides that what the newborn Prince

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31. Ritchie, "Blackstick Paper No. 1," 722.

32. Ibid.

Giglio and Princess Rosalba really need is “a little misfortune” to help them become wiser adults.<sup>33</sup> So, after delivering this benediction—and turning an impudent doorman into a door knocker—Blackstick recedes into the background just several pages into the story. Giglio and Rosalba, the hero and heroine of the story, are each deprived of their claim to the throne, and the ensuing tale centers on how these two figures overcome their misfortunes to eventually marry and reign over their two kingdoms united. William Thackeray’s story revels in satirizing the vain, foolish, warmongering tendencies of his buffoonish characters, and only a few appearances of the noble Fairy are needed to provide a counterpoint. However, in Anne Ritchie’s references to *The Rose and the Ring*, the powerful female reformer takes center-stage. Thus, the introduction to the first Blackstick Paper eulogizes the Fairy’s “serious composure, her austere presence of mind, her courageous outspokenness and orderly grasp of events” and places her in “the utilitarian school of Miss Edgeworth and Mrs. Barbauld”—both real women writers and educators.<sup>34</sup>

This depiction of Blackstick is only partially founded in William Thackeray’s story. He does present Blackstick as the patron of Prince Giglio’s education, but for all the Fairy’s magical powers her approach is rather traditional. Once the young Prince strikes out on his own, Blackstick appears in disguise to leave him a magic bag that provides all things needful, including a university cap and gown and a stack of books to begin Giglio on the path of education. And her other gifts, such as pocket money, a sword, and the tools to black his own

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33. Thackeray, *The Rose and the Ring*, 12.

34. Ritchie, “Blackstick Paper No. 1,” 721.

boots (just as the indolent boy goes searching for a servant to do it for him) continue to emphasize Giglio's preparation for a life of active decision-making and duty. However, there is no education or similarly empowering gift for Princess Rosalba. The character-building "misfortune" granted to Rosalba takes the form of abandonment, and thereafter she falls into the hands of a series of caretakers. Left for dead in the woods, Rosalba is raised by a family of lions for her first few years. Then King Valloroso and his Queen (coincidentally, the same family that has usurped Giglio's crown) find her begging in the park and take her in as a maid for their daughter Angelica. She lives there under the name Betsinda until as a young woman she is turned out of the house by the envious mother and daughter. But Betsinda/Rosalba finds yet another protector in the form of a loyal old knight who formerly served her royal parents. In the end, she marries her Giglio. The reader is hard pressed to find anything progressive in Thackeray's depiction of Rosalba or Blackstick's plans for her. Although Rosalba seems more sensible than Giglio, her abilities are presented as innate and passive. She is an ideal woman in unfortunate circumstances, and she dutifully awaits rescue. It is only fair to note that Thackeray's female characters fit the mold of fairy tale, with Betsinda/Rosalba playing the role of Cinderella and Angelica resembling one of the ugly stepsisters. Because Giglio—foolish though he may be—must become a fairy-tale hero, he gets most of Blackstick's help.

Thus it is quite an innovation in Anne Ritchie's essays that the Fairy Blackstick's attention is trained on the progress of women. Indeed, the twentieth-century Blackstick seems less a function of William Thackeray's story than of Anne Ritchie's life-long interest in charitable institutions and education for women. In early essays like "Little Scholars" and

“Toilers and Spinsters,” Ritchie brought her readers on a tour of organizations to help the London poor. Similarly, in the *Blackstick Papers*, she reincarnates the Fairy Blackstick to accompany her on expeditions to schools for girls and women, among other places. In fact, Ritchie portrays Fairy Blackstick as a patron of education throughout the series. In “Blackstick No. 5: Egeria in Brighton,” Ritchie follows Blackstick to consider new educational systems for girls and young women. Interestingly, Ritchie begins by situating herself as an agent of nostalgia as she reflects on the pleasures of Brighton and her father’s attachment to it. After describing recent renovations to the resort town, Ritchie sighs, “Alas! perhaps some of us still prefer the memory of the old chain-pier to the presence of all these dazzling ‘improvements’....”<sup>35</sup> (This nostalgic tone is intensified in the collected *Blackstick Papers*, where the facing page to this statement is an early portrait of William Makepeace Thackeray.) But Ritchie’s focus shifts away from Brighton because Blackstick is more interested in the “various seats of youthful learning and education scattered about” neighboring Roedean.<sup>36</sup> And so, at Blackstick’s prodding, Ritchie’s thoughts meander from the great revival of education caused by Rousseau and the Edgeworths to “Mrs. Garrett Anderson, who came away in her youth, fresh from Cambridge honours, with new and healthy views of what education ought to be.”<sup>37</sup>

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35. Ritchie, “Blackstick Paper No. 5: Egeria in Brighton,” 724.

36. *Ibid.*, 727.

37. *Ibid.*, 728. Ritchie seems to have confused Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the physician, with her niece, Philippa Fawcett, who placed “above the senior wrangler” in math at Cambridge in 1890.

In “Blackstick Paper No. 3,” we are told that Blackstick would like to be head mistress of one of the pioneering new institutions for girls.

It is not surprising that Ritchie’s *Blackstick Papers* return again and again to the topic of women’s education, given the increased debate during the 1890s about women in the universities. The reference to the headmistress’s “Cambridge honours” is a reminder that although women had gained admission to university lectures and were permitted to sit for the examinations, neither Oxford nor Cambridge would yet confer on women the degree of B.A. or M.A. The debate was waged in the periodicals as well as the colleges, and the crux of both arguments, as we shall see, hinged on “tradition.” When we recognize how often Ritchie’s *Blackstick Papers* return to the topic of education, it becomes increasingly clear that the introductory homage to William Thackeray and the literary past held dear by Ritchie’s audience is an ingenious prop for Ritchie’s progressive views on women’s education and intellectual authority. Indeed, she uses these essays to make her audience feel nostalgic for progress.

I have argued that Ritchie relies on a dynamic use of the past to support her progressive agenda, and in the *Blackstick Papers* she does so by assigning to the past the conditions she would like to promote in the present. For example, “Blackstick Paper No. 7,” published in November 1903 and interestingly subtitled “Links With the Past,” begins: “If ... anything at all strikes [the Fairy Blackstick] very particularly after ten or twenty thousand years of experience, she might perhaps be inclined to compare the present condition of women with what it was in the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign.” What Blackstick goes on to notice is that although

women are freer under King Edward's rule...they seem in some ways less dominant and important, not so much considered, as they once were. They may be authors now, but they are not such authorities; they may be teachers, but they are no longer mistresses. They seem less of personalities somehow.<sup>38</sup>

We do well to remember that Ritchie's own writing career began in the 1860s, and over the space of forty years she witnessed the rise of figures such as the lady novelist, the sensation writer, the Girl of the Period, the Girton Girl, and the New Woman. Such characters of the late nineteenth-century press kept women's intellectual achievements in the forefront of public discussion, yet there is no real sign of women's diminishing authority in 1903. Given that the New Woman was still a prominent figure in the first decade of the twentieth century, Ritchie's lament seems either naive or disingenuous. But I think it is more likely that Blackstick Paper No. 7 is designed to persuade her readers that women have been authorities traditionally. In short, she makes women's public, intellectual power as authors and teachers a historical fact rather than a radical goal for the future.

It is no coincidence that the roles of author and educator overlap so frequently in Ritchie's work because both bring up questions about women's intellectual authority.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, many of the arguments for and against women's entrance to the Universities invoke the same themes that characterized debates about the lady novelist in the middle of the century, including the distinction between popular and high culture, the doctrine of separate spheres, and the appeal to tradition or what has always been. For instance, Charles Whibley kicks off

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38. Ritchie, "Blackstick Paper No. 7: Links With the Past," 604.

39. We have seen in previous chapters how nineteenth-century reviewers frequently presented themselves as instructors or guides.

his two-part series for the *Nineteenth Century*, “The Encroachment of Women,” by drawing a direct line between women writers and University women: “The lady novelist is not a lasting danger: she dies of her own popularity and is forgotten; but if the women who now clamour for degrees are not foiled in their design, they will certainly impair, and possibly destroy, an ancient institution.”<sup>40</sup> Whibley’s distinction between the lady novelist and the University woman fits neatly into Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin’s description of the late-century culture wars in which women’s novels were relegated to the merely “popular” while men’s writing accounted for elite, high culture. For Whibley, the threat of the woman writer has been solved by placing her in the ghetto of popularity, whereas the University woman poses a significant threat to the high culture of traditionally masculine Oxford and Cambridge. Whibley sees women’s admission to the Universities as the latest and more virulent threat to patriarchal society, so it is no surprise that his objections to women’s University degrees include a slippery slope argument about women’s power. He warns,

it should be understood at once that if the memorialists succeed in their ill-omened enterprise, the result will be a mixed University. Henceforth women will vote in the Senate; they will masquerade in the cap and gown of manhood; they will sit upon syndicates and aspire to the throne of the Vice-Chancellor; they will play a practical part in the management of some thousands of undergraduates; the bolder among them will claim to be proctors....<sup>41</sup>

He describes women as invaders, pirates, and thieves, emphasizing that they have no right to what they pursue. He also relies on the atmosphere of a men’s-only club:

If women sat at the high table, and wore the gown of bachelorhood, the ancient university which hundreds of years have known and revered would be no more. The air of seclusion would be forever dissipated; the college courts,

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40. Whibley, “The Encroachment of Women” (1896), 495.

41. *Ibid.*, 499.

which Gray and Byron knew, would be invaded by a horde of women, tricked out in a costume unbecoming their nether skirts, whose career would be as ill assorted as their raiment.<sup>42</sup>

Whibley's description of university women as cross-dressers calls to mind those women journalists like Margaret Oliphant and Anne Mozley, or novelists like George Eliot, who disguised themselves behind male personae, pseudonyms and anonymous articles. Indeed, the air of seclusion Whibley so longs to protect resembles that of *Maga's* library, which Oliphant had so convincingly praised under her male persona in the anonymous *Blackwood's*.

Furthermore, if Whibley believes that certain spheres are men-only, he also asserts that some genres are masculine as well. Of course, this was no new argument. We have already seen in Chapter Three how George Henry Lewes had excused women's fiction writing by explaining that "the Masculine mind is characterized by the predominance of the intellect, and the Feminine by the predominance of the emotions." By allowing that "[o]f all departments of literature, Fiction is the one to which, by nature and by circumstance, women are best adapted," Lewes successfully implied that women were likewise naturally barred from success in "masculine" subjects such as history or science.<sup>43</sup> This notion of gendered genres persisted in the 1890s, as Penny Boumelha reveals in her discussion of the options available to women writers. Pointing to the journalist Mary Frances Billington's "rather sobering account of the difficulties faced by aspiring entrants," Boumelha explains,

Women could have no reasonable expectation of reporting on areas of activity dominated by men—sports, war, finance, or the role of traveling correspondent. Unless they worked specifically for women's journals, female

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42. *Ibid.*, 537.

43. Lewes, "The Lady Novelists," 72.

reporters must expect to write about social functions, the home, beauty and dress, and philanthropy, replicating in the public sphere of professionalisation the private sphere of domestic ideology.<sup>44</sup>

Just as the discourse of gendered genres regulated what subjects women writers could tackle, the education debate often focuses on what subjects women students could tackle. Believing that women are inherently incapable of mastering certain subjects—particularly the classics—Whibley explains, “despite their cleverness and their manifest power of absorption, women are the sworn enemies of Greek and Latin. When once they are permitted to vote in the Senate, they will throw all their influence into the scale of the Philistines.” Indeed, Whibley prophesies that coeducation will lead to “the degradation of learning.”<sup>45</sup>

Feminist writers like Alice Zimmern strove to refute such arguments by citing real women’s achievements in the so-called masculine subjects. In her brief history of “Women in the Universities,” Zimmern writes:

There were many prejudices to overcome, foremost among them the belief that these studies were too hard for women. Happily this fallacy could be dispelled by facts. For a long time mathematics was always quoted as the study most unsuited for women. Then came Miss Scott’s success in the Tripos. ... This event aroused sufficient interest to be noticed by the papers, and the general public, realising that one woman, at any rate, could grapple with this abstract study, changed their cry, and began to dwell on the incompatibility between the female brain and classics. It was Miss Ramsay, now Mrs. Butler, who put an end to this by taking the first place on the Classical Tripos list.<sup>46</sup>

Zimmern, a feminist critic and education expert who published several books on education and wrote for the *Forum*, *Leisure Hour*, and *Contemporary Review*, among other periodicals,

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44. Boumelha, “The Woman of Genius and the Woman of Grub Street,” 165-66.

45. Whibley, “The Encroachment of Women” (1896), 499.

46. Zimmern, “Women at the Universities,” 436-37.

offers a useful comparison to Anne Ritchie.<sup>47</sup> Although Zimmern seems to have been much more frankly an activist, these two writers share a number of rhetorical strategies, including a creative use of the past.

We would expect debate about women's education to focus on women's capabilities for learning, but it is a strange fact that the arguments mounted by Anne Ritchie, Alice Zimmern, and Charles Whibley all hinge on an appeal to history or tradition. Whibley, for example, depicts women's efforts to gain access to the Universities as an attack on an ancient institution. Arguing that "an appeal to history should have been enough to silence the innovator," he

writes:

if tradition carried any weight, the battle would be won already. For 600 years our colleges have been exclusive as monasteries; shy of abrupt change, they have grown modern by accident; they are as well weathered, as beautiful, sometimes, maybe, as corrupt as ancient buildings; and he who would reform them wantonly is as wicked as the architect who, in the accursed name of 'restoration,' destroys what he can never replace.<sup>48</sup>

Whibley gets a lot of mileage out of depicting university women as the enemies of tradition and all that is hallowed—or at least familiar. He surmises that once they succeed in their quest,

The women...will discover that the university is still hampered by tradition; they will use their influence to sweep away what ever vestiges remain of habit

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47. The *Leisure Hour* began in the 1850s as a penny weekly addressing a lower-middle-class readership, while the *Cornhill* started as a prestigious shilling monthly. But by the end of the century, they were addressing much the same audience. They also have some important similarities such as their emphasis on "family reading."

48. Whibley, "The Encroachment of Women" (1896), 495.

and convention. And then—and not till then—will they realise that they have killed the goose that laid the golden eggs.<sup>49</sup>

Whibley seems to argue that tradition—even a corrupt one—is all we have. If we overturn it in the name of reform, we lose all the good along with the bad.

Zimmern, on the other hand, tries to counter such a view by figuring university women as restoring a much older tradition. Presenting a cyclical view of history, she insists that women are only regaining a place they have held in the past:

Of course, the higher education of women is no new thing. Plato, who seems to have forestalled the moderns on most points, would have given girls the same education as boys, while certain among the later Platonists really carried some of these theories into practice. We know that in the Middle Ages the convents were often centres of female learning; we have all heard of the lady professors at Bologna, and the classic attainments of Queen Elizabeth and Lady Jane Grey. It is a mistake to speak as though the existence of intellect among women were a discovery of the latter half of the nineteenth century. What the last fifty years have witnessed is a revival following on a peculiarly dark period, and one that has spread more widely and penetrated more deeply than any before it.<sup>50</sup>

Zimmern's argument is reminiscent of Anne Ritchie's method of helping readers to feel nostalgic for progress. Certainly, both women were interested in establishing a tradition of women's intellectual power. Ritchie also highlights the staying power of ancient institutions that embrace change. Her third "Blackstick Paper"—in which she and the Fairy Blackstick visit St. Andrews, "that famous Scottish shrine of education"—seems like the perfect answer to Whibley's claim that giving women the university degree will result in "the destruction of an

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49. *Ibid.*, 501.

50. Zimmern, "Women at the Universities," 433-34.

ancient establishment.”<sup>51</sup> After investigating the new opportunities available to female students, Ritchie observes:

Not the least charm of St. Andrews...is the fanciful contrast between the centuries. The old ruins of near a thousand years ago, with their many grim legends of fire and sword and axe, make a fine background for the youthful aspirations and good spirits of the boys and girls who belong to this present 1901.<sup>52</sup>

She seems to defy the rift that Whibley threatens, demonstrating instead the gains of uniting the ancient setting with modern ideals. Once again, Ritchie’s dynamic figure of young and old is used to address a contentious issue.

Admittedly, both Ritchie and Zimmern are cautiously critical of past practices.

Zimmern refers to the recent past as “a peculiarly dark period,” and in “St. Andrews” Ritchie refers to the shortcomings of the Greeks in educating women. Near the end of the essay, she notes that

the Greeks, who did not consider women much (unless they happened to be goddesses), kept all these good things for their philosophers and their young men. But the ruling heads of the colleges of St. Andrews are more liberal, and they allow young Scotswomen to share in the lectures and examinations with their brothers.<sup>53</sup>

Yet both Zimmern and Ritchie couch their rare barbs in an overall narrative of continuity. For both Zimmern and Ritchie, women’s education is already an established fact of historical record.

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51. Ritchie, “Blackstick Paper No. 3: St. Andrews,” 149; Whibley, “The Encroachment of Women” (1896), 498.

52. Ritchie, “Blackstick Paper No. 3: St. Andrews,” 149.

53. *Ibid.*, 153.

Blackstick herself aside, “Blackstick Paper No. 3” offers perhaps the most vivid example of how Ritchie uses the contrast between young and old to illustrate the importance of the critic’s double point of view, and also how this view is necessary for the critic who cares about literary and social issues. This essay is structured around a series of contrasts, and I have already discussed the middle one between St. Andrews’ ancient setting and its modern pupils. I turn my attention now to the contrast Ritchie presents in the essay’s short introductory scene because it succinctly demonstrates the feminist uses of Ritchie’s double point of view. The setting is a beautiful coastline. Ritchie juxtaposes two female observers of the scene: “One enthusiastic admirer of nature, a homely old body in shabby black, is so taken with the beauties of land and sea and heaven, that she has walked into the middle of a puddle”; meanwhile, “A pretty little girl, in a bright green frock, conscious of new boots and light curls, stops short to stare at the enraptured woman.”<sup>54</sup> Ritchie’s old woman is fascinated by the world around her, and only she seems aware of its grandeur. But this awareness leaves her in the mud, unable to move forward. The younger woman has all the means to move forward, but we know by the description of her dress and her curls that she is more concerned about her own image than about the larger world. This scene is reminiscent of Ritchie’s explanation in “Heroines and Their Grandmothers” that

the real secret of our complaint against modern heroines is...that they are morbid, constantly occupied with themselves, one-sided, and ungrateful for the wonders and blessings of a world which is not less beautiful now than it was a hundred years ago.<sup>55</sup>

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54. *Ibid.*, 148.

55. Ritchie, “Heroines and Their Grandmothers,” 640.

Just as Ritchie argued that the heroines of past generations still have something to teach today's readers, she suggests here that the younger woman might begin to see the greater world by looking through the old woman's perspective. Ultimately, the ideal position is something between the two women's perspectives—a "double point of view" occupied by Ritchie's narrator. This narrator positions herself to see both what the child sees and what the old woman sees. With this dynamic vision, she can proceed to the gate of St. Andrews—and to the essay proper—to consider current trends in education for girls and women. When Ritchie muses that "Fairy Blackstick herself might have liked to be Warden of University Hall, which has lately been opened for women," she gives a clear signal that progressive change requires a "double perspective" that illuminates present circumstances with the wisdom of experience.<sup>56</sup> By aligning herself with the ageless fairy, and indeed, by deploying youthful old characters throughout her essays and criticism, Ritchie figures her own influence for future generations of women.

Anne Ritchie's critical works offer an ideal study of tradition and the woman critic because she was so conscious of this issue herself. In her diverse essays and criticism for the *Cornhill Magazine*, Ritchie frequently interweaves discussion of literature and literary history with women's experiences and feminist issues such as education and employment. Indeed, from the very start of her career, Ritchie adopts her "double point of view" to dynamically relate past and present, old and young, tradition and change. Ritchie seems to have recognized very early her potential to make women's concerns central to literature and to her

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56. Ritchie, "Blackstick Paper No. 3: St. Andrews," 153.

audience, and she uses that power to create new canons of great literature. Ritchie manages to appear the friend of tradition while simultaneously promoting change. Such flexibility seems necessary and more common than Charles Whibley's arguments admit. Indeed, Whibley's emphatically pat ideas about the immutability of tradition at Oxford and Cambridge do not appear to apply to literature itself or the study of it. Apparently, Whibley was much more willing to part with tradition in literature than he was in the University. According to Kenneth Graham, "in a heated controversy over art and morality in the correspondence columns of the *Scots Observer* in 1890, Charles Whibley is one of the few contributors not to toe the traditionalist line with reference to the novel."<sup>57</sup> Graham sees Whibley as a pioneer who bucks tradition by emphasizing form over moral considerations. Interestingly, Graham aligns the moral approach to literature with tradition and Grundyism, and thus with women. So, in a strange twist, tradition is on the side of women in this case, and Whibley stands opposite.

As a rhetorical topos, *tradition* is, arguably, a touchstone throughout literary criticism, but it takes on new textures from the late-nineteenth century into the modern era. In the reflective and self-conscious mood of the *fin de siècle*, journalists were eager to take stock of the century and develop lists of their era's greatest literature. Canon-making endeavors, which are always about defining a tradition, also shifted into high gear with the growth of English as a university subject. As they wrote their literary and social histories and built their canons, these writers were, in fact, developing their narrative of themselves. They created the tradition

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57. Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900*, 93.

they claimed to follow, just as later modernist writers would create the tradition that best served their purposes. Of course, for the moderns that usually meant rejecting their Victorian forebears. And yet Ritchie's conscious reshaping of tradition fits remarkably well with the modernist agenda. Other scholars have analyzed the connections between Ritchie's writing style and that of her modernist step-niece Virginia Woolf, but I see affinities with another canonical modernist's idea of genius. The term *tradition* proved happily malleable for T.S. Eliot, who manages to define literary tradition as something that changes to suit each new creative work. Although T.S. Eliot was in fact an admirer of Charles Whibley, I cannot help suggesting that Anne Ritchie better fulfills some of that modern writer's famous ideas about the artist and the critic, particularly in relation to tradition.<sup>58</sup> In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), Eliot considers experimentation, or poetic genius, in relation to poetic tradition. He acknowledges that the typical modernist stance favors the new and experimental, explaining, "We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed." But Eliot demonstrates that the love of the new does not necessitate a clean break with the past. Indeed, he argues that "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is

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58. Eliot was a great admirer of Charles Whibley's "Musings Without Method" series, which ran in *Blackwood's* for over twenty-five years. He referred to them as "the best sustained piece of literary journalism that I know of in recent times." Quoted in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Whibley, Charles (1859–1930)," by H. C. G. Matthew.

modified by the introduction of the new...work of art among them.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, according to Eliot, we should not “find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”<sup>60</sup> As this chapter has shown, Anne Ritchie’s work enacts this principle.

All of this is to demonstrate that, far from being a concrete notion, *tradition* is in process for many literary critics. But the topos poses a different set of challenges and opportunities for the woman critic. There is the problem of recognition and canonization that still plagues women writers and feminist critics. From this standpoint, tradition is a narrative that women writers want to write themselves into. But tradition functions somewhat differently in social criticism, where an appeal to “what has always been” may be sufficient to crush feminist causes. Thus, we expect to find women bucking tradition in their social criticism. It is fair to say that the woman critic at the turn of the century approached a veritable land-mine in invoking tradition in either literary or political contexts. Put simply, to support or oppose tradition in one genre may be to negate her arguments in the other. Yet Anne Ritchie straddles this difficult line and makes tradition work toward feminist goals.

MacKay has also detected the underlying feminist purposes of Ritchie’s attention to the past. Pointing to Ritchie’s biography of Madame de Sévigné, as well as her introductions to the works of her predecessors like Mary Russell Mitford, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Maria Edgeworth, MacKay suggests that Ritchie understood how, in addition to connecting with

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59. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 761.

60. *Ibid.*, 762.

their contemporaries, “a woman’s literary community needs to build links with the past as well, to discover its common roots and sense of heritage, if it hopes to operate in the past and to extend into the future.”<sup>61</sup> While I agree that Ritchie uses her role as critic to make women authors and their texts relevant to a new audience, I would add that building those links was often a creative endeavor. Ritchie makes this clear in the very first “Blackstick Paper,” where her discussion of old books and the influence of past writers practically lays out her method of reinventing the past. She writes: “It seems a pity when books pass away... One day everybody is reading them and living in their pages, then their voice is silent suddenly and heard no more among us; they are mysteriously shelved—forgotten—consigned to oblivion.” When Ritchie delivers the glad news that sometimes “such books are called back to existence again and raised from the dust, and their hearts seem to beat once more, and the time has come for their reincarnation,” she makes it clear that these “[d]ear ghosts” have been transformed.<sup>62</sup> “Some,” she explains, “seem to speak more calmly now and with authority being dead. There is a certain measure in their passion.”<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Ritchie’s reincarnated Blackstick originates in William Thackeray’s past, but this Fairy has taken on a new kind of authority in support of progressive women’s issues. Far from causing a backlash, the feminist Fairy Blackstick “is welcome,” like all of these literary ghosts, because her presence “conveys no terror to our senses,” her “influence is comforting,” and her “light shines from their past into

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61. MacKay, “Only Connect,” 103-04.

62. Ritchie, “Blackstick Paper No. 1,” 722.

63. *Ibid.*, 723.

our present.”<sup>64</sup> But as Anne Thackeray Ritchie’s persona demonstrates, such links to the past often have much more to do with the future.

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64. *Ibid.*, 722.

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