



Making Space: Key Popular Women Writers Then and Now

Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill

**with contributions from
Abigail Burnham Bloom, Mariaconcetta Costantini,
Carolyn Lambert, Catherine Pope and Valerie Sanders**

Abstract

Reclaiming lost or forgotten (Victorian) popular women writers and their works is still an important, ongoing aim of literary and gender studies. In this article, we take the *Key Popular Women Writers* series, published by Edward Everett Root Publishers and edited by Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill, as one example of a current series that continues and develops this feminist practice. By drawing upon the research, writing and publishing practice of current women academics, as well as related issues concerning literary value, canonicity and the popularity of the Victorian writers themselves, we showcase the methodological and pedagogical practice of finding motivation and inspiration beyond that which is established as the norm. Furthermore, through examining the current political, academic and publishing fields' impact on researching and teaching (Victorian) popular fiction, we discuss breakthroughs, challenges and potential ways for the study of this area to move forward. Popular women's writing continues to offer readers, students and academics, ways to challenge conventions, embrace the multi-faceted nature of our field and take our place on the landscape.

Keywords

Victorian popular women writers; feminism; canon formation; academia; publishing

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When we were approached at the Victorian Popular Fiction Association annual conference by John Spiers of Edward Everett Root publishers about reviving the *Key Women Writers* series that he had overseen at Harvester Press in the late 1980s, we were delighted and eager to work with him. We both knew of the original series (edited by Sue Roe) which was “developed in a spirit of challenge, exploration and interrogation” (Roe 1986: vii). It was important feminist work, and we wanted to build on that in a meaningful way. For us, this meant evolving and adding to, rather than replicating, what had gone before.

Now, almost exactly a year (at the time of writing) after the publication of the first five titles in the series, is a good time to revisit our motivations and hopes for *Key Popular Women Writers*, and to reflect upon some of the challenges we have faced (and continue to face) as editors. In this article we discuss the *Key Popular Women Writers* series so far, including the reasons we thought that the series was worth reviving, how and why this new incarnation differs from the original series, and what we hope it can achieve in the future. In a break with the convention of individual or at most joint authorship of articles in the Humanities – and yet perfectly in the spirit of both the Victorian Popular Fiction Association and this journal – we asked the authors of the volumes in the series so far to contribute short interventions about their connections to their respective key popular women writers and to talk about their own practices as women writers. In reading, researching and writing about their chosen female writers, our authors have found tips for writing practice and productivity, not to mention inspiration, wit and wisdom from some energetic, industrious, resilient, stubborn and charismatic personalities. As editors of the series, we consider it a privilege to have worked with such talented authors, and it is our pleasure to be able to share their work in this space. Making these *Key Popular*

Women Writers' titles a reality has been a collective and constructive endeavour between ourselves, our publisher and our authors (and indeed their Victorian authors) and the format of this piece marks out that collective nature. After an introduction and our authors' discussions, we shall return to address some of the challenges we have faced in editing the series, and to explain why we believe collective action on a bigger scale is needed to continue to rediscover and learn from popular women writers who deserve to be recognised as key figures in literary and feminist studies.

This form also allows us the opportunity to think about the position of the series within popular fiction studies, Victorian studies and gender studies. These are areas which are currently undergoing much needed revision and revisioning in response to a widely (but not universally) acknowledged need to diversify, broaden and challenge the work we do in terms of feminism and its intersections, and in terms of literary value and canonicity. As the interventions from the KPWW authors below show, the reasons for turning to female authors of popular fiction are often intimately connected to the need to find motivation and inspiration beyond what is established as the norm, and the desire to shed light on voices and works that have not received enough recognition. As a piece, therefore, this article reflects (through a focus on a particular series and a small number of women writers) on the state of the field(s) and speaks about, and to, the importance of recovering and maintaining women's popular fiction as a focus of research and teaching. We hope this contributes to the culture of inclusivity and openness that is central to the ethos of *Victorian Popular Fictions* and the Victorian Popular Fiction Association (VPFA).

Sue Roe's original series featured titles by respected female academics about women writers who were already part of the canon at the time, and have (mostly) become even more central since, such as Angela Leighton on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Gillian Beer on George Eliot. In discussing how to renew and update the series, we decided – and our position as scholars of Victorian popular fiction undoubtedly had much to do with this – that focusing on key *popular* women writers would add something new to what had gone before, and would serve a useful purpose for researchers of women's writing, popular culture and feminist/gender studies. This refocusing meant that we had to think carefully (without becoming too inflexible) about what we meant by “key” and what we meant by “popular” in this context. If “popular” is considered as synonymous with “successful,” then many women writers who were popular in the nineteenth century (in that they were well-known, widely read, with long, profitable and prolific careers – though not always all of these together), are not popular now, in that their works are often out of print, they are little known outside of academic literary studies, and have limited recognition within it. Part of this limited reach is due to the fact that they were also “popular” in the sense of writing for, appealing to, or producing writing of a standard to be accessible to a wide, non-elite readership – they can be considered lowbrow or (perhaps worse) middlebrow, and the literary quality of their works is not established, recognised, or guaranteed. Essentially, the nineteenth-century popularity of the women writers included in our new series has contributed to the suppression of their literary legacies, and has been a barrier to them being considered “key” to literary studies in modern scholarship. Part of our agenda, therefore, is to bring attention to, and celebrate the work of, women writers who we feel *should* be key figures in part *because* of their popularity at the time they were writing. This in itself is feminist work, we feel, not least because a popular (in both senses) male writer such as Dickens has not faced the same kinds of obstacles to being considered a key figure for modern readers and scholars.

Academia has begun to recognise the importance of popular fiction as an area of study in recent decades (in part thanks to feminist critics' desire to move beyond the canon of Dead White Males), and as Ken Gelder notes, "the academic study of popular fiction genres – some of them, at least – is these days more respectable than it used to be" (2016: 3). Nevertheless, Gelder continues,

Assumptions – that popular fiction never changes or develops [...], that it seduces readers and empties their minds, and that the "copy-cat" stories it tells saturate our culture to the extent that they seem to be everywhere – are culturally pervasive. For literary critics who share these perspectives or dispositions, popular fiction can therefore bring with it nothing less than the apocalypse, the end of "serious" literature as we know it.

(2016: 3)

Gelder's observations relate primarily to contemporary fiction (forming part of his introduction to *New Directions in Popular Fiction*), but for readers of Victorian popular fiction, especially of the once controversial, but now widely studied and taught, genre of Sensation Fiction, such disparaging assumptions about their "commercial atmosphere [...] redolent of the manufactory and the shop" (Mansel 1863: 483) will seem very familiar. Without entering into a quarrel with critics about literary value (let alone moral purpose), we can assuredly say that the engaging writing, exciting plots and unusual characters of popular women's writing are not deterrents to us as scholars (as it certainly was not to the general Victorian reading public): they allow us important insight into the tastes and preoccupations of their readerships. Victorian popular novels by women are illustrative and important in numerous ways. As our series description states, "studying the work of these authors can tell us much about women's writing, creativity and publishing practice, and about how popular fiction intervened in pressing political, social and cultural issues surrounding gender, history and women's role in society" (Hatter and Ifill 2017). And, as both literary critics and general readers know, fiction often gives expression to sentiments that could not be conveyed in other ways. Fiction can speak to readers decades or even centuries later and give access to manners and ways of life that might be otherwise unrecorded or overlooked. Recent historians have noted that "popular fiction [is] more bountiful than high-brow literature for the purpose of uncovering past feelings – for accessing collective emotions" (Crosier-De Rosa 2010: 1344). This is particularly true when thinking about the lives of women who, in the nineteenth century, were often less likely and less able than their male counterparts to express their thoughts and opinions publicly.

As well as being of immense value in providing insight into Victorian culture, and especially the lives of women within a patriarchal framework, these novels are also often worthy of study as works of literature in their own right, often displaying a style and sophistication that their being viewed as commercial endeavours can belie. The original *Key Women Writers* series made sure to be "attentive to aspects of composition such as style and voice, as well as to the ideas and issues to emerge out of women's writing practice" (Roe 1986: vii), and this is something that we continue to encourage in the new series, even as we focus on popular rather than "high" literature. The popular women writers currently featuring in our series were accused by contemporary reviewers of writing too much, writing too quickly, writing for money or writing cheap entertainment with little substance. Valerie Sanders, for instance, notes the "unwillingness of critics, then and now, to see past [Margaret] Oliphant's prolific productivity as the most notable thing about her" (2020: 13). Yet the fiction of popular women writers often includes intriguing narrative voices, humour, irony, nuance, intertextuality and allusion that indicate they were not only intelligent, widely-read and learned women themselves (though perhaps not with the same traditional field of knowledge as a male author of the period), but were writing for audiences that they considered

to be capable and engaged readers. The books in this series pay attention to the quality of the writing, as well as seeing it as a source of sociological or cultural understanding: they prove that such serious reading of Victorian light literature can be very rewarding. This series aims, therefore, not just to reflect on these writers and their work from a feminist perspective, but also to show why their absence from the canon in the first place is an aesthetic loss that needs to be rectified.

It might seem unnecessary to explain our initial focus on Victorian authors to readers of *Victorian Popular Fictions*, especially when we are Victorianists ourselves. However, it is important to note that we see the nineteenth century as a fertile and inspiring starting point. After all, popular fiction developed along with the novel as it became the dominant form of literature in the Victorian period. It was in the Victorian period that the power and influence of fiction were recognised and heatedly debated more than ever before or since. It was also in the nineteenth century that many middle-class women found that they could respectably (both financially and morally) earn a living by their pen to the extent that it became the most obvious alternative to working as a teacher or governess. The authors currently featured in the *Key Popular Women Writers* series were professionals who, although they often wrote out of necessity to support large and/or extended families, acted within the marketplace with a level of agency and freedom of expression that was not available to many of their predecessors or contemporaries. It also gave them access to many female readers who would have recognised or sympathised with the situations, fears and frustrations that they depicted and reflected on. As Sharon Crozier-De Rosa asserts, it is the

interplay between the author's and audience's values, attitudes and emotions that is integral to the understanding, and therefore success, of a highly popular or bestselling work of fiction. The relationship existing between the writer and his or her contemporary audience allows for a society's "manners" and "feelings" to be understood – even when, or especially when, they are not obvious to readers distanced from the era or society in which the text was produced.

(2010: 1344)

This relationship, when it is between a female author and a female reader in a society where women's voices are often silenced, overlooked or disregarded, can allow for a building of solidarity and an expression of fellow-feeling or sympathy from a distance. As Valerie Bryson has noted, terms like "patriarchy," "sexism," and more recently "mansplaining" and "#MeToo" can "contribute to change by helping women see things they previously knew but had no way of expressing. In doing this, they can also reframe public perceptions and debates" (2021: 61). While such terms were not, of course, available to Victorian women writers or readers, popular fiction in the Victorian period could serve a similar role – showing women oppressions and injustices that were more common than they may have realised, and offering alternative ways of thinking and acting. Catherine Pope, for example, shows how a number of Florence Marryat's heroines are able "to assume a self-created identity, rather than the 'feminine' one imposed upon them by patriarchal discourses" (2020: 73). When a popular woman writer depicts misogyny as reprehensible, or women's domesticity as constructed rather than innate, she is able to share that knowledge with her readers, giving them access to perspectives, and ways of thinking about their own situations, that they might otherwise not have had. Writing was, as it remains now, a powerful and potentially far-reaching form of resistance that could build empathetic connections and invite emotional and intellectual awakenings, revealing the injustices and obstacles of the present, and hinting towards hope for the future.

Although this is to-date a Victorian-focused series, we are currently seeking to expand the titles chronologically in both directions. The features of popular fiction by women that we have identified here emerged in the eighteenth century, and continue into the twentieth. Our women writers were influenced by those who came before them, and went on to influence countless others. Furthermore, we do not limit our titles to the exploration of women writers who can be clearly or unproblematically labelled as feminist or proto-feminist. Exploring the ways in which women writers (and their characters) intentionally or otherwise submit to convention, contradict themselves, send mixed messages and express confusion about their culturally prescribed position as women, is just as important as highlighting moments of resistance, liberation and empowerment. It was important to us that we did not encourage our contributors to the series to “claim” their women writers as feminists, wholly or in part, unless they had good reason to. This is because we wanted to avoid an anachronistic and simplifying reading of women writers that highlighted the feminism we wanted to see over less palatable aspects (not just antifeminism, but also classicism and racism). It was also, however, because we wanted this new series to be what one reviewer claimed of Susan Sheridan’s *Christina Stead* (part of the original series): “as much concerned with what” the women writers’ “texts have to teach feminist criticism as [...] with what critical theory can uncover in the texts,” and to “[illuminate] our understanding in both directions” (Edelson 1989: 872). This ability to learn from past women writers must include an understanding of how they differ from us in lifestyles, concerns and ideologies, and also from observing (sometimes with regret and discomfort) how they do not. The final part of this article (after the sections by our contributors) indicates ways in which this series, and academia more broadly, needs to continue to work towards equality, diversity and social justice, and reading the works of popular women writers with self-awareness and an openness to self-criticism is one way of doing this.

Our series acknowledges the importance of not just focusing on the depiction of women when considering issues of patriarchy and gender relations. As Ruth Heholt and Jo Parsons observe, “much less scholarly attention [has been] paid to women’s textual construction of men, with the vast majority of work looking at men’s representations of women” (2021: 155), and there is space for “a much more detailed examination of the male subject through the eyes of those who are used to being represented as more gazed upon than gazing” (158). As some of our first reviewers have noted, the exploration of masculinities in Mariaconcetta Costantini’s *Mrs Henry Wood* (Menegaldo 2021) and Valerie Sanders’ *Margaret Oliphant* (Baker 2021: 5) offer insight into how Victorian popular women writers questioned issues of masculine power and responsibility in their society.

As authors and editors ourselves, we have been led to reconsider our feminist perspective as a direct result of engaging with these popular authors. One example of this comes from Costantini’s *Mrs Henry Wood*. Initially both ourselves and Costantini had intended the book to be titled *Ellen Wood* (her given name and married surname, the form which many recent feminist scholars choose when writing about her and her work, rather than the name under which she published), but our publisher raised concerns that this name was not the one that people would expect when looking for publications about Wood, and that the monograph might get missed in keyword searches. We initially resisted this change as it seemed counterintuitive for a book in an avowedly feminist series to take the husband’s name: shouldn’t we liberate Wood from the restraints of Victorian patriarchal oppression and refer to her by her “own” name (albeit still her married surname)? However, this moment of pause gave us the opportunity to not only reflect upon our own reasons for pushing forward the use of Ellen Wood, but to consider why Wood may have chosen to publish under the name she did. She may well have been, as Costantini speculates below, “an anti-feminist supporter of the

Victorian law of coverture,” or putting it more mildly, a complacent acceptor of the status quo. What she certainly was, however, was a professional author and editor, with a literary persona to cultivate and a career to progress. We do not know why she made this particular choice, or the extent to which it was her own choice (it could have been, just for example, a dictate from her husband or publisher, a suggestion from a friend, as well as entirely her own idea), but to assume that her choice was a “wrong” one that we as modern feminists needed to correct started to seem rather patronising on our part. It would be disingenuous to say that the practical and financial concerns of our publisher did not have an impact on our decision (see below for more on the sobering realities of academic publishing). It was only after much discussion that we chose to use Ellen Wood within the book, but to go with *Mrs Henry Wood* as the title, largely because that was her professional name, her “trademark” and “successful commercial logo” (Costantini 2020a: xiii).¹ By interrogating Wood’s decisions, we series editors were led to re-evaluate our own preconceptions, and to acknowledge that there was not one correct “feminist” answer to the question of what an author should have called herself, and what we choose to call her.

As we have hopefully shown by this point, reading popular women writers can do more than simply reveal to us the injustices inherent in Victorian and contemporary patriarchal society and suggest means of resistance. The following words from the authors of our series demonstrate some of the ways in which the study of these Victorian women is a positive and productive undertaking.

Florence Marryat, by Catherine Pope

I first encountered Florence Marryat back in 2007, while researching spiritualism for my MA. I devoured *The Dead Man’s Message* (1894), a vivid novella in which a bullying vivisector gets his comeuppance in the afterlife. His first wife makes him suffer, while his canine victims bite his ankles. Intrigued, I dug around and discovered a woman who posed as Joan of Arc on her *carte de visite* and lived with an actor thirty-three years her junior. I needed to know more.

Extensive Googling revealed a huge body of work and a colourful personal life. Marryat’s fiction comprises a heady blend of sensation tropes, political campaigning, and plots that can only have been inspired by her fondness for brandy. Admittedly, many of her novels are flimsy, betraying the fact that she often dashed them off in just six weeks. Where they shine, though, is the way in which she blends her life with the novels, often appearing as an avatar or a strong authorial voice to support her heroine. Having survived two abusive marriages, Marryat was keen her readers should avoid the same fate.

More than a decade after I first met Marryat, I’m still intrigued by her. This fascination has sustained me through a PhD, a monograph, and several book chapters. Although I certainly would not want to emulate her politics or her weakness for soldiers, here is what inspires me about Marryat.

¹ It is worth noting that in the *Key Women Writers* series, the book about Maryann Evans and her works was entitled *George Eliot*.

Anyone wanting to understand Marryat is confronted by 68 novels, more than a hundred short stories, several plays, and an assortment of other publications. She achieved this impressive output alongside bringing up seven children of her own and eight stepchildren. Like Charles Dickens, she became the breadwinner for an extended family. In an obituary, her daughter described her as a “weary workhorse” (Church 1899: 558). Often annoyed that men were perceived as the breadwinners, Marryat pointed out that *she* paid for the butter (Marryat 1894: 95).

Anthony Trollope is usually considered the beacon of Victorian productivity. But with a stay-at-home wife and a retinue of servants, he never had to rummage around to find a clean pair of pants. Marryat had domestic servants, too, but she was managing them alongside her portfolio career as writer, editor, singer, actress and public speaker. She embraced new technology, using a typewriter for her later novels. Had she inhabited the twenty-first century, Marryat would have almost certainly used AI transcription tools and used the time saved to annoy people on Twitter.

Marryat used work as a distraction from the torment of her personal life. For her, it provided both independence and dignity. Although she approached the idea of female suffrage equivocally, Marryat was outspoken in demanding a woman’s right to paid employment outside the home. For her, this was far more important than getting the vote. Perhaps understandably, she believed little changed, regardless of who was in power.

And Marryat’s attitude towards her work was pragmatic. She understood that not everything would be successful. You can only control the amount of effort you put in, not how the book is received. Perhaps that’s why she often published three novels in a year. Spending more than a few months on a project would be exposing herself to a lot of risk. None of Marryat’s novels were best-sellers, yet she continued to earn a small amount from each of her large number of publications over many years – what we now recognise as the long-tail effect.

Not only did she push herself to keep creating, Marryat also experimented with different topics. While some of her contemporaries kept trotting out the same themes across the decades, Marryat tackled vivisection, terrorism and homosexuality. *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) – perhaps her most famous novel now² – was, of course, jumping on the *Dracula* bandwagon. But Marryat’s vampire is psychological, rather than bitey. I cannot find any evidence of this novel having been especially successful in her lifetime. However, it is the biggest selling title for my publishing house Victorian Secrets. If Marryat is right and there is an afterlife, she’ll be fuming on the Other Side, desperate to get her share of the royalties.

She also adapted well to the shift from the rambling triple-decker to the taut single-volume editions of the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Marryat understood the economics of the publishing industry, working it to her advantage when negotiating contracts. Unlike George Gissing (Morton 2002), she seldom sold her copyright, instead using syndication and moving publishers to earn multiple streams of income from her work. She was also savvy enough not to rely completely on writing.

² And the subject of an article in the first number of the *VPFJ*: see Ifill, 2019 (Ed.).

Marryat certainly enjoyed a diverse career alongside her writing. At the age of 48, she joined the D'Oyly Carte company, performing in two Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Having reached that age myself, I'm more inclined to stay at home with a pizza and Netflix. Later she established her own School for Literary Art and also made money from breeding dogs. I am not sure it is possible to join the dots of Marryat's career, even retrospectively, but she is unlikely to have cared. It is a problem only for her biographers.

These diverse business interests allowed Marryat to maintain her independence and her distance from two unsatisfactory husbands. It is significant that her career really took off after the passing of the Second Married Women's Property Act in 1882. From this point, Marryat was able to fully control her investments without fear they would be sold from under her nose. In her 1878 novel *Her World Against a Lie*, Marryat celebrated the passing of the first act, which had allowed wives to retain their own earnings. Now they were also legally separate from their husbands. This phenomenal work ethic and business acumen ensured Marryat retained custody of the children after her first marriage broke down. When her husband tried to exercise his masculine privilege and deny her access, Marryat took him to the Court of Chancery. There she explained to the judge that her earnings supported the family, not her husband's. Only she could afford to keep them. Marryat triumphed, and her husband's demand for alimony was also rejected. At this time, both wife and children were deemed the husband's property, so it was an extraordinary outcome.

As the Women's Institute for Financial Education (WIFE) tagline goes, *A Man Is Not A Financial Plan* (2021). Marryat grasped this better than many of her contemporaries. Well, I am sure many *understood* the concept, but there were few alternatives available to middle-class women in the mid-nineteenth century. Marryat was prepared to strike out on her own and withstand the ensuing controversy. She cohabited with her second husband before marriage (or indeed divorcing the first one), and never married her young long-term companion. Although this disdain for respectability meant Marryat was shunned by polite society, it meant she protected her hard-earned wealth.

Despite enormous financial responsibilities, at her death, Marryat had amassed a large property portfolio and a large back catalogue. She had successfully defended both over the decades and also found happiness outside of marriage. For her, marriage was a carceral institution that existed to contain, rather than support, women. She challenged both in her life and her fiction. In her 1885 *Woman of the Future* lecture (Marryat Notebook nd: np), Marryat proposed the New Marriage Lease Act, which transformed marriage into a purely civil contract that must be renewed after 3, 5 or 7 years. Just in case any men warmed to her idea, she added that the contract was dissoluble only by the female partner. The sexual double standard would remain, but women had the upper hand. She would be bewildered by how little progress has been made since then, especially around childcare and equal pay.

Marryat was continually challenging orthodoxy, especially in *There Is No Death* (1891) and *The Spirit World* (1894). Although these books are often held up as examples of her "dottiness" (King 1976: 4), I argue in my monograph that, for Marryat, Spiritualism was more about questioning authority, especially when it is motivated by consolidating patriarchal power. She preferred the séance room, a space controlled mainly by women.

There is still much more I want to understand about Marryat, and further areas of her life to explore. My advice for new researchers is to choose a *difficult* author. There is a temptation to plump for safe areas, where we can start by reading everything else that has already been written. But then we are just piecing together, rather than breaking new ground. Marryat's elusiveness is part of the appeal. She forces us to think deeply about her many contradictions and denies us the opportunity to draw neat conclusions.

While some of Marryat's crusades make us want to applaud from the sidelines, her brand of feminism was far from intersectional, and she was not what you would call a team player. However, she was prepared to challenge patriarchy at great personal cost, pursuing an agenda of both deeds *and* words. Marryat kept going in the face of uncertainty and a lack of approval. What better lesson could there be for the 2020s?

***Frances Trollope*, by Carolyn Lambert**

"Time" is the first word that springs to mind when considering Frances Trollope and my own research journey. The malleability and slipperiness of time itself – too little time, or too much time – too many demands on available time or those stretches of time spent gazing helplessly at a blank computer screen trying to formulate an argument that is simultaneously expansive and creative, yet soundly based on evidence and theory.

Trollope used her time in a way that is characteristic of much of her writing: fiercely focused, alight with the knowledge that she must produce her quota of pages to keep her family from starvation. She "writes too fast," complained the critic in the *New Monthly Magazine*. She "gives way too indulgently to the rash speed of her grey-goose quill, so that it sometimes [...] leads her on a wild-goose chase" ("Female Novelists" 1852: 19). She is a "blue-stockings who travels in seven-leagued boots," (19) outpacing critics who try to keep up with her prodigious output. A quick glance at the chronology of her writing shows her publishing several books in a year, often alternating the production of novels and travel books with serial publication, something her son Anthony described as a "rushing mode of publication" (Anthony Trollope 1996: 93). Time became a critical stick with which to beat this hugely popular, yet hugely misjudged woman writer. "[T]ime failed me" said Elizabeth Gaskell, an equally controversial writer telling Charles Eliot Norton that she could not find the time to produce an article for *The Atlantic Monthly* (1997: 581). Trollope could – literally – not allow time to fail her. Her son Anthony, always ambivalent in his attitude towards his mother, nevertheless allocates her an entire chapter in his *Autobiography*, describing on the one hand how she "was at her table at four in the morning" (1996: 21) to begin her work, "aware that unless she could so succeed in making money, there was no money for any of the family" (1996: 21); but claiming on the other that so much work was required because "she was extravagant and liked to have money to spend" (1996: 22). It is a gendered criticism that continues to resonate with mothers today, struggling to juggle the demands of home and family with work. Certainly, it affected Trollope's literary reputation. Anthony recognises the relentless hard work his mother undertook to support her family while simultaneously suggesting that her income was used primarily for her own benefit.

Trollope was both a literary and a biological mother, inspiring three of her surviving adult children to become writers themselves. Yet it was Anthony's profound ambivalence towards his mother that led him to commit what I describe as literary matricide. Although Trollope was often a controversial and ground-breaking writer unafraid to tackle topics of profound social and cultural contention such as slavery, children working in factories and Poor Law reform, her literary skills were equally acknowledged. The "rash speed of her grey-goose quill" ("Female Novelists" 1852: 19) did not always preclude contemporary critics also recognising her ability as an accurate and sardonic chronicler of society.³ Nevertheless, it was Trollope's intimate family relationships, that impossible tightrope that she was forced to walk between earning income and caring for her family, that almost extinguished her books for posterity. Time, again, comes to mind. Trollope completed her novel *Tremordyn Cliff* (1835) by the bedside of her dying son, Henry. Even Anthony, her severest critic, commented: "I have written many novels under many circumstances; but I doubt much whether I could write one when my whole heart was by the bedside of a dying son" (Anthony Trollope 1996: 24). Trollope's life experience forced her to deal with what for others might have been impossible stresses. Anthony remarks that the "writing of a novel is the most difficult task which a man may be called upon to do; but it is a task that may be supposed to demand a spirit fairly at ease. The work of doing it with a troubled spirit killed Sir Walter Scott" (24).⁴ It was precisely Trollope's concern for her family, her knowledge that she was the only one able to provide a source of income for them, that enabled her to have the courage and self-discipline to keep the two strands of her life, "the doctor's vials and the inkbottle" (24), in balance. Yet Anthony's *Autobiography* finally confined her to her primary role as mother, leaving him, for many years, as the Trollope Triumphant, the feted and acknowledged male author whose success was apparently self-created. After the publication of the *Autobiography*, his mother's books largely ceased to be published and the reclamation of her as an important woman writer has only recently begun.

Trollope was fortunate in having a room of her own in which to write, like her eponymous heroine *Mrs Mathews* (1851). The titular character, left motherless like Trollope herself, lives an independent single life with her elderly father, free to indulge her passion for books and learning. When she turns fifty, her father decides that she will be incapable of managing her financial affairs after his death, and to meet his dying wishes, Mary agrees to marry his old friend Mr Mathews, although she has few illusions as to the restrictions that this will bring. She consents to the marriage only if she has a separate allowance of £500 a year (which she intends to spend on books), the right to dispose of her own property and her exclusive use of a "sacred den" in which to study (Trollope 1851: 1:311). It is the room in which "the chief materials of her life's history were to be found," (1:311) an intimate reflection of her very self.

³ See, for example, a review of *Gertrude* (1855) in *The Critic* ("New Novels" 1855: 476) in which the reviewer compares Trollope favourably with Thackeray.

⁴ David Skilton notes that "writing to pay off the debts of the publishing house of Ballantyne after its bankruptcy in 1826 is said to have hastened the novelist's death in 1832" (Anthony Trollope 1996: 248, n8).

Looking around my own study, I reflect on the materiality of reading and research. My books too, illustrate my life journey: beautiful children's books from my publisher uncle; a Bible presented to my great-grandfather nearly a century ago and used recently as preparation for listening to a lockdown lecture on the use of the Book of Esther by nineteenth-century women writers; my undergraduate Anglo Saxon primer; books still smelling of coal fires and printer's ink; books discovered with delight in charity shops and second-hand bookshops across the nation recalling holidays and days out. Studies are richly resonant spaces and even in this digital age the tactile pleasure of handling a book, remembering whether a sought-for quotation is on the verso or recto page, the shape of the printed text on the page, marginalia made by others – I vividly remember the angry comments made on a library copy of Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Wives of England* (1843), presumably by an infuriated female student – all of these things are part of the texture of research.

The materiality of these links to the past, to people and to places, reminds me powerfully of all the people who have helped me on my journey into the world of Frances Trollope and on previous journeys of literary discovery. I think about the importance of these literary godmothers in my life. Elsie Michie notes the masculine environment in which nineteenth-century women writers had to operate:

both in seeking publication and in the act of writing itself: “the figures who surrounded and influenced them as they wrote, the individuals who functioned as mentors, literary role models, and gatekeepers to the world of publishing, tended to be men, either family members or literary professionals, often both at once

(1993: 2).

Trollope turned to her childhood friend Mary Russell Mitford to help her get her first book, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) published, and, like many other women writers, she sought support from a close network of female friends who at various times provided literary, practical or emotional support, and sometimes all three. I think how kind colleagues have read early drafts of my work, helping me to shape and hone a loose baggy monster into something at least approaching tailored sophistication. I think how, especially during a global pandemic, we all need structure in our lives, and I reflect on the way in which I shape and structure my own research. Margaret Beetham draws attention to “messy research” (2018: 150) – the way in which, despite abstracts, proposals and plans which we convince ourselves sound logical, we sometimes end up, like Alice, either falling down a rabbit-hole or running after the rabbit which dismisses us with a flick of its tail, leaving us to re-trace our steps to re-join what we hope will be a path out of the wood. And I think about the 1924 diary I found in a bookshop containing random entries by a woman living in Burma (as it was then known) describing a colonial life of tea and cocktail parties, notes of shooting trips into the jungle interspersed with housekeeping records and accounts, an entry to “dine Government House” on 4 September with “pay bread bill” written underneath. How do we make sense of the data we gather, so often partial and incomplete, so often tantalizingly on the periphery of our vision and understanding?

Back to thinking about time again, the luxury of time in which to think and reflect and a quiet space in which even small parcels of time, if that is all I have, can be used effectively, just as Trollope did. I think about the discipline and focus she had and remind myself that sometimes we just need to keep going – to write something on the page to start us on the journey. I think about the passion she had that

impelled her to write, not just to keep her family fed, but to feed her own need to find a voice, a woman's voice, to call out the injustices she saw around her, a scouring combination of necessity and a burning desire to right wrongs. I think with admiration of Anthony's comment on her "power of dividing herself into two parts" to keep "her intellect by itself, clear from the troubles of the world and fit for the duty it had to do" (Anthony Trollope 1996: 24). Her focus and discipline are something to emulate. Perhaps we all need to be a "blue-stocking who travels in seven-leagued boots" ("Female Novelists" 1852: 19), diligent researchers with our virtual goose quills alight with the same fundamental passion Trollope showed throughout her writing, using our research skills to help to uncover lost female voices.

And I reflect, with some delight, that the end of the journey will be the material object of my own book to add to the re-assuring surroundings of my own "oddly-furnished apartment" (Trollope 1851: 1:311).

***Geraldine Jewsbury*, by Abigail Burnham Bloom**

In graduate school I specialized in Victorian prose and studied the same novels again and again in my classes. Although I never tired of Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot or the Brontës, my conception of Victorian literature changed when I read Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1834). The galivanting prose, the fragmentary nature of its sections, the rush of ideas laced with wisdom and humour captivated me. I explored Carlyle's work further in my doctoral dissertation and delved into works about him. Biographers of Carlyle presented his wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle, in a variety of ways: from the neglected wife of a genius who selfishly deprived her of a writing career to an angry hypochondriac who never allowed Carlyle the peace he sought. I have traced modern scholarship and attitudes on Welsh Carlyle in several articles. In works about the Carlyles, Geraldine Jewsbury's name appears frequently as a friend of both Carlyles who informed Thomas Carlyle's first biographer, James Anthony Froude, that Carlyle was a man who should never have married. Froude's use of this comment started the debate over Carlyle's impotency and his treatment of his wife. I wanted to know more about Jewsbury, who published two best-selling novels, but who was known primarily for being an intimate of the Carlyles.

Geraldine Endors Jewsbury (1812-1880) wrote much more than two novels. Over a career spanning thirty-one years, she published seventeen articles, eight short stories, six novels, two long children's books, approximately 2,300 book reviews and reports for publishers on over eight hundred manuscripts, as well as writing innumerable letters to her wide circle of friends. In addition, she worked as a translator and an editor. By means of her writing, Jewsbury was able to support herself, develop an independent life, move to her own apartment, and join the literary circles of London.

While still living in her father's house in Manchester, Jewsbury became depressed by her loss of religious beliefs and concerned about her future. Having read the early works of Thomas Carlyle, and hoping for insight as to how he overcame his doubts, she appealed to him for help in a letter, leading to a year-long correspondence. Encouraged to visit him, she attracted the Carlyles with her intelligence and openness,

but annoyed them with her emotionality, her interest in attracting a husband, and her intrusion into their domestic life. Thomas Carlyle happily relegated the relationship to his wife. Despite periodic coldness from Welsh Carlyle, they maintained their friendship until death intervened.

Jewsbury's career began when she suggested that she, Welsh Carlyle and another friend write a novel together by sending the manuscript back and forth among them. When the two others dropped out, Jewsbury went on to produce *Zoe: A History of Two Lives* (1845). Unfortunately, nothing remains of the seeds of the novel. No manuscript copies of any of her works, her journals, or discussion of her day-to-day writing habits have been discovered. In her letters, Jewsbury mentions that a deadline approaches, but never shares writing difficulties with her correspondent. However, she found a way around problems; for example, when her eyes bothered her from reviewing books for the *Athenaeum*, she reviewed children's books which tended to have larger print. In her letters Jewsbury emphasizes the general, rather than the specific of why and how she writes. She recommended the practice of writing to Welsh Carlyle:

we not only feel less acutely things that would otherwise irritate beyond endurance, but these things are transformed for us into artistic studies, instructions, experiences, and this goes a long way towards softening their intensely personal application to ourselves Besides which, one's work is an 'ark of refuge,' into which one flings oneself on all occasions of provocation

6 October 1851, Ireland, 1892: 425.

Jewsbury found writing both an escape from the real world and a means of interpreting her experiences for the benefit of her readers.

Jewsbury transports her readers imaginatively, and she brings before them the major issues of her era: religion, class consciousness, the treatment of children, and what we now call feminism. Much of her work focusses on the upbringing and education, the employment and occupation of women, gender relationships, the dynamics of marriage – issues that are still with us today. Reading her letters, her works, and researching her life allowed me to enter another life, another era, another world, which removed me temporarily from my own mundane trials. I sought to secure Jewsbury an audience in the twenty-first century because I believe in the purpose of her life, in her desire to educate and lead women.

When I set about writing on Jewsbury, I had little idea of the format my work would take. During my journey of discovery, I struggled to locate her letters. Jewsbury's letters to Welsh Carlyle were heavily edited and then published by Mrs. Alexander Ireland in 1892, who destroyed the originals. There is no central repository for Jewsbury's letters, and her literary executor's name was John Smith, making it difficult to uncover information about him from databases because there are so many John Smiths. Jewsbury's letters are housed in libraries around the world. The largest stash, comprising approximately 550 letters written to Walter Mantell, is located in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. I obtained a microfilm copy of the letters from the library and was immediately overwhelmed by the poor photography – the letters were frequent blurry or too dark to read. I knew I would have to take a trip to New Zealand to transcribe the letters, and as appealing as that sounded in the abstract, I was not eager for such a large investment of time and money. I put the problem aside

and read all I could about the letters until I stumbled upon the information that Professor Waldo H. Dunn had gone to New Zealand in the 1930s and transcribed the letters. I was delighted to read and photograph his transcriptions at the Ohio State University Library, somewhat closer to home.

As I traced Jewsbury's letters and organized my thoughts about her words, I learned of the *Key Popular Women Writers* series and knew that Jewsbury would be a perfect fit for the series. Widely recognized as a Victorian feminist, she was also a best-selling author in her time, yet she is not widely read today. I followed up *Geraldine Jewsbury* with a collection of Jewsbury's shorter works, *Leading the Way for Victorian Women: Geraldine Jewsbury and Victorian Culture*, which was also published by Edward Everett Root in 2020.

Jewsbury had major accomplishments, a large influence, and a fascinating life, yet she is frequently overlooked or undervalued. Virginia Woolf begins her essay, "Geraldine and Jane," with the statement, "Geraldine Jewsbury would certainly not have expected anybody at this time of day to bother themselves about her novels" (1932). Jewsbury's novels are definitely absorbing, but they are meandering and seem hurriedly written, suggesting, as Woolf intimates, that Jewsbury did not take them seriously enough. But this is not borne out by the novels' composition history, which demonstrates their author's commitment to her artistic vision. Jewsbury had hoped that her first novel, *Zoe*, published in 1845, would be important. Her publisher, Edward Chapman, recommended changes to the novel so that it would end with a marriage, a tendency of Victorian literature written for women. Jewsbury refused to make the requested change and responded, "My desire is to produce a work which shall take a permanent rank at once and not obtain a mere ephemeral reputation" (12 August 1844, Morgan Library). That has not been the case. The only republication of *Zoe*, along with Jewsbury's second novel, *The Half Sisters*, was by Virago in the 1970s as part of the recovery of women authors. The lack of any other republication suggests a lack of interest.

Jewsbury had a complicated relationship with what we now call feminism. She was well enough educated to ensure that she could support herself as a governess. She believed that all women should be educated and be able to work to the upmost limit of their abilities, to consider difficult issues and to take charge of their own lives. Inspired by other women, Jewsbury asserted that women should help each other. She trusted to the importance of each individual rather than to a movement. Although she did not believe women should advocate for suffrage, she assumed that as women changed, men and the laws would change as well. Jewsbury did not want to be associated with emancipated women perhaps because of her prominence in the literary field, a field dominated by men, to whom she wanted to appear feminine and acceptable. She worked tirelessly to direct women towards a future where they would not centre their lives around love and marriage, but would develop friendships with women and men.

Although disappointed by not writing a great novel or marrying (she proposed to three men, but remained single), Jewsbury saw great value in work and changed her direction to take advantage of opportunities presented to her. I admire Jewsbury's optimism, enthusiasm, honesty and, especially, her persistence. She worked at whatever task she undertook to the best of her ability. I have tried to do with my work what

Jewsbury would have done, to keep going, and to accept new challenges. There is a pleasure in pursuing our thoughts and interests as far as we can, and in having our opinions heard. I think of the advice of Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*, which Jewsbury lived by:

‘Do the Duty which lies nearest thee,’ which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already have become clearer... Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called To-day; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work.

(*Fraser’s Magazine*, April 1834: 452).

Learning is a pleasure and when we find something that can add to the store of wisdom in the world, it is our duty to try to communicate that to others.

***Mrs Henry Wood*, by Mariaconcetta Costantini**

I discovered Ellen Wood late in my academic career. Like many popular writers of the long nineteenth century, Wood was (and still largely is) little known to the Italian academics with whom I have interacted over the years, first as a student and, later, as a colleague. In my university years in the 1980s, I was encouraged to read David Daiches’s monumental *A Critical History of English Literature* (1960) which, in my professors’ views, encompassed what was worth knowing in the field. Daiches’s exclusion of most Victorian popular literature contributed to shaping my idea of the English canon. Encouraged to believe that his four bright-coloured volumes included all relevant authors and works, I paid no attention to the names of “minors” – such as Wilkie Collins, fretfully dismissed as the father of the English detective novel – nor was I aware of the numerous gaps. The seminars and lectures on selected authors I attended confirmed the existence of an Olympus of literature from which many were cut out. In addition to Shakespeare, we studied Milton, Pope, the Romantics, Richardson, Fielding, very few Victorians (the Brontës, Dickens and Wilde), and the major Modernists. Fascinating though they were, these learning experiences made me unaware of the existence of countless authors who, especially in the age of Victoria, experimented with the novel-form, turning it into an appealing popular medium.

Some changes occurred during my PhD studies, when I gained consciousness of the artistic and cultural value of a few non-canonical authors. A turning point was the discovery of Christina Rossetti, to whom I chose to devote part of my doctoral dissertation. Inscribed by Daiches and other critics in the minor categories of old-fashioned religious poetry and children’s literature, Rossetti’s poems challenged my imagination with their complexity, their semantic ambiguities and their metrical irregularity, raising questions about the reliability of literary classifications and the function played by gender prejudices therein. Did a compelling poetess like Rossetti truly deserve her secondary role in literary history? Were some twentieth-century critics not endorsing the same gender bias expressed by Victorians like Ruskin, who had objected to Rossetti’s poetic eccentricities, blaming her “unfeminine” ambition to compose poems and theological work? (*Letters* 1965: II.391; Ruskin 1899: 73)

It was, however, during my lectureship and my later academic career that I developed a deeper consciousness of these gender issues and a strong conviction that the canon should be rethought. A first important step was my discovery of Victorian sensation literature which, though increasingly studied by British and American scholars, was still disregarded by most Italian academics in the early twentieth-first century. My research on Collins – the first sensationalist to attract my attention – focused primarily on the Victorian professionalisation of writing, the diatribe against popular fiction, and the silenced yearnings of women glimpsed through works like *Armadale* (1862-64). While dealing with Victorian professionalism, I was forced to tackle thorny deontological issues which convinced me to explore other sensation novelists. This is how I came across Ellen Wood's writings.

Wood's ambivalent characterisation of doctors was the first aspect I analysed; but my perusal of her oeuvre revealed more thought-provoking elements that warranted investigation. My curiosity was further enticed by the obscurities and contradictions of her life. A matronly figure often dismissed as a conservative sensationalist, Wood proved to be a successful writer and editor, whose professional attitudes clashed with the ideal of domesticity she publicly embodied. While reflecting on these aspects, I was invited to contribute a volume on Wood for the *Key Popular Women Writers* series. The timeliness of the commission strengthened my conviction that we are somehow "chosen" by our authors: we are drawn to them by strange elective affinities that keep us exploring their writings and their secret lives.

After discovering Wood step by step over the years, I was then faced by a big challenge: that of offering an overall interpretation of her production and her ideological stance. Writing a monograph with a feminist approach involved delving into the complexities of her writing, unravelling the contradictions of her gender views and, last but not least, trying to fill in the many gaps and riddles of her life. The very name she used to publish her fiction, "Mrs Henry Wood," was a major source of doubt. Was Wood to be considered an anti-feminist supporter of the Victorian law of coverture or was she, rather, an early feminist skilfully disguising her critique of patriarchy? How should I interpret the many ellipses found in the two memoirs written by her son Charles, which still are the only extant Wood biographies? And how did the "unsaid" of these biographies accord with the glimpses of a proactive professional which, in some critics' views (Newbolt 2001, Phegley 2005, Sussex 2010), are offered by some letters preserved in Richard Bentley's archives?

Unable to solve these riddles, I decided to let her works speak. After selecting a number of novels and short stories centred on female desires and frustrations, I went through them noting down recurrent models of femininity, inconsistencies and figures swerving from the norm. If some characters fell into clear-cut categories, others were puzzlingly positioned between normativity and transgression. Their neither/nor identity attracted my attention. Was Wood using camouflage strategies to sketch out alternative gender roles? Driven by this idea, I strove to classify major and minor characters into types, creating further subdivisions along class lines that widened the social picture. The classification thus obtained cast light onto the author's exploration of alternative gender models which, without overtly challenging stereotypes, offered a dynamic spectrum of new attitudes that women (and in some cases, men) could adopt if they lived in a less constraining social system.

The next step was that of identifying the appropriate feminist theory with which to read Wood's oeuvre. The risk to avoid was, of course, that of anachronism. For this reason, I made my selection on the methodological premise that theories developed after Wood's death should be carefully applied to her texts and context. I realised that these theories could not be interpreted as being anticipated in her oeuvre: they should rather be viewed as the offspring of notions that began to surface at her time, that she perceived in some social tensions but that needed new epistemic contexts to be fully expanded and systematised.

Therefore, before starting to write the volume, I matched each selected theory with an aspect of Wood's fiction and life that it contributed to illuminating. Luce Irigaray's view of women as "fetish-objects" was, for instance, essential to clarify the commodification of women in narratives with a strong fairy-tale intertextuality. These narratives suggest Wood's intuition – albeit not full awareness – of the mechanisms through which women were exchanged between men to strengthen homosocial bonds. Similarly, Judith Butler's notion of "performativity" was relevant to deciphering Wood's characterisation of bizarre (female and male) figures, whose conduct challenges the assumed naturalness of class and gender roles, revealing their fluidity and potential reversibility. In using Butler, however, I was always careful to specify that her theorisation was only partly applicable. Wood certainly did not gain a full consciousness of such ideas, even though she instinctively felt that the body is not sexed prior to its acts and postures, but rather determined through discourses that are institutionalised by society.

Feminist notions were also crucial to make sense of the incongruities of Wood's life and writing practices. Judith Fetterley's idea of the "resisting reader" (1978) – a textual interpreter who does not accept "as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny" (1978: xx) – was useful to interpret the frequent addresses to readers (especially female ones) found in Wood's narratives. In reflecting on Wood's life, moreover, I realised that Virginia Woolf's concept of "a room of one's own" cast some light onto silenced aspects of the author's life, such as the hardships she must have faced in developing her literary genius within the home.

My guiding principle, in writing the volume, was that of filling in some of the gaps found in Wood's biographies, of unravelling the complexities of her reticent writing and making sense of the camouflage strategies she used to convey provocative meanings. Working on Wood strengthened my conviction that feminist theories can unveil these strategies and make silences speak. They can also, and significantly, reveal the "blind spots" from which women's writings have too often been interpreted and give them more visibility. If it is true that more comprehensive critical histories have been published after Daiches's, it is also true that the literary and cultural significance of Victorian popular fiction – and especially women's works – still need to be properly assessed and revalued. Timidly added to syllabi in the Anglophone world, novelists like Wood remain largely unknown in other European countries, where they are seldom read by students and only occasionally researched by academics.

A last aspect worth considering is the impact that decolonising the curriculum can have on our social systems. The age in which Victorian popular women novelists lived and wrote was, in some respects, riddled by tensions and disparities that are not wholly solved today. Unwelcome recrudescence of patriarchal oppressiveness and

gender prejudices are witnessed daily in our world, not only in countries dominated by retrogressive ideas but also in societies where important women's rights were acquired in the past. As a female academic living in Italy, a nation still distressed by gender inequalities, I have learned much from my work on Wood. Her personal struggles and fictional experiments have made me aware of the subtle sociogenetic mechanisms through which women are controlled and forced to stifle their aspirations. For these reasons, I am sure that reading her works can teach much to university students in Italy and elsewhere, showing them how to interpret the world they live in correctly and how to act in order to improve it.

***Margaret Oliphant*, by Valerie Sanders**

Margaret Oliphant would today be designated a workaholic, but she would almost certainly have denied it, along with all notions of self-importance or any need for quiet working conditions or special considerations. There are in fact many contradictory factors about her management of what we now call the life-work balance. This phrase has a particularly poignant significance for Oliphant, all of whose children predeceased her, despite her passionate devotion to their welfare. Although her writing (of both novels and reviews) was a financial necessity, she repeatedly stated that she wrote because she enjoyed it. One of the most famous things she said in her *Autobiography* (1899) was

I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children.

Oliphant 2002: 48.

The implication is that she would have done it anyway, and indeed she began writing and publishing when she was still living at home with her parents, like her own author-heroine, Agnes Atheling, and reading her work aloud to the family circle.

From the start, Oliphant worked, like Jane Austen, the Brontës and Elizabeth Gaskell, in a family setting, with other people around her: first her parents and brothers, then her children and any house guests who happened to be staying. If her early novel, *The Athelings* (1857), is anything to go by, she deeply valued sharing her work with the supportive family who had both critiqued her writing and helped her publish it. Serialised when she was a young wife and mother with two small children, the novel self-deprecatingly recalls this practice when Agnes's father invites her, after the day's business is finished, to "read some of your nonsense, if you like" (Oliphant 1857: I.24). Much to the family's mixed amusement and pride, Agnes's first novel, *Hope Hazlewood*, is launched to popular acclaim, but far from assuming professional status, Agnes begins her next novel at the family table, where her writing is normalised as a womanly, even a sociable, domestic pursuit: "Agnes went on with her writing, Mamma with her work-basket, Marian with her dreams" (III.95). "[S]he can write anywhere," her mother proudly tells a visitor; and indeed this episode ends with Agnes folding her little siblings' clothes while arraying her ideas in "the shining garments of genius" (III.109; III.112).

Writing is thus for Oliphant a semi-social activity, whether in the lesser drawing-room of her Windsor home with its open archway into the adjoining larger room, or on holiday, where, as Anne Thackeray Ritchie observed, she would set up her writing station wherever she was: “I was always struck,” Ritchie remembers, “when I saw her writing, by her concentration and the perfect neatness of her arrangements – the tiny inkstand of prepared ink, into which she poured a few drops of water, enough for each day’s work, the orderly manuscript, her delicate, fine pen...” (1913: 23). Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own” never seems to have been a requirement, and as Elisabeth Jay notes, she wrote in bed if necessary, and could, under pressure, push herself to fifteen hours a day (1995: 268-70).

The most contradictory aspect of this disciplined writing practice is a welcoming of family bustle and interruptions. For all her professed envy of George Eliot’s protected “mental greenhouse” conditions at the hands of the supremely considerate “caretaker and worshipper,” G. H. Lewes, Oliphant seems to have liked having an excuse not to be alone and working all the time (Oliphant 2002: 50-1). Although she once told her son Cyril’s school-friend Howard Sturgis not to come round till after four o’clock, “as that was post time, and she was ‘rather busy’,” she rarely demanded the “freedom from interruption, the hushed house” that other authors insisted on (Sturgis 1899: 238). It is worth comparing her habits, for example, with Harriet Martineau’s. After Martineau (1802-76) had retired to the Lake District, she issued clear instructions to guests on respecting sacrosanct working hours, as Charlotte Brontë, visiting Martineau in Ambleside in 1850, informed both her father and Ellen Nussey. Brontë was asked to breakfast alone and amuse herself until two o’clock when her host had done a full morning’s work in her study (Brontë 2007: 180). Oliphant sounds like someone who would never have said that to a guest, however inconvenient, which possibly hints that writing all day might have bored her.

Elisabeth Jay has already anticipated the question of what we can learn from Oliphant’s writing practice. She ends her essay, “A Bed of One’s Own: Margaret Oliphant” (2009), with a jocular list of the things the novelist’s experiences warn us to avoid, such as responsibility for dependent relatives, or downplaying the worth of our own work. On the more positive side, however, Jay advises becoming an “insatiable reader” and being “flexible, about both where and when you are prepared to write,” including trying different genres (2009: 66-7). All of this is good advice, but what I think we can best learn from Oliphant’s writing practice is essentially how committed to it she was. Although her way of organising her work can sound casual, she was “driven” in a way that seems very modern. If she were living now, I can imagine her travelling with a laptop, and writing in her hotel room or café in between sightseeing and social activities. While her resilience in keeping going despite the devastating losses of husband and children may seem almost inhuman, her willingness to socialise and travel in the face of never-ending deadlines suggests a stable outlook attuned to multi-tasking. Of course, as Jay reminds us, she could rely on the support of “long-staying female servants,” but ultimately Oliphant’s successful self-management is as likely to be attributable to her even temperament and robust health as to the domestic support she had at home (1995: 41).

My own writing practice could not be more different from Oliphant's. The security of a steady income as an academic means that I have never had to write in order to put bread on the table; and while there is never enough time to do everything as carefully as I might wish, I have always avoided writing through the night. Ideally, my writing is done in the mornings, at weekends or in university vacations when my mind is fresh and uncluttered. Not having idle hangers-on, I can choose when I work, and I have a study at home as well as a University office, each with its own laptop and computer. For this *Key Popular Women Writers* project I re-read some of the novels I already knew and added some more to extend my range. I wish these had included *The Athelings*, as it says so much about being a novelist, but that was a subsequent discovery triggered by examining a PhD, a further academic stimulus that Oliphant lacked. Unlike her, I also have the technology for relatively painless redrafting, and I never had to ask my brother to produce fair copies as she did.

Where my writing practice does resemble Oliphant's is in two areas: a Victorian commitment to self-discipline, and a real pleasure in writing. I have written since I was a child, inventing children's stories, and writing remains the aspect of my work as an academic that I most enjoy. For me, time, even in the stagnant months of a national lockdown, passes far more satisfyingly writing than it does reading, where my concentration too often wanders to the internet or the window.

Any author's writing practice is subject both to personal and cultural pressures. Just as Oliphant's seems alien to me, mine will perhaps seem alien to the next generation of scholars, as might my coming of academic age at the time of "forgotten women writers," when their recovery was a popular strand of nineteenth-century studies. I felt excited and enabled by this development, but nothing stays the same for long in our field. As an early 2020 issue of *Victorian Studies* shows, with its rallying cry to shake up the discipline, new fields demand our attention: in this case, the inequalities of "the dynamics of race and racialization" (Chatterjee, Christoff and Wong 2020: 380). Subsequently, academics will probably come under additional pressures to make their research socially relevant, as well as matching departmental and Faculty priorities, and (like scientists) attracting external funding for large-scale collaborations. Some scholars thrive on collaboration (and I have certainly benefited from it), but equally, part of me envies Oliphant her freedom from all institutional restraints other than advice from her editors.

My advice to younger academics is therefore less about writing practice as such – you will already be brilliant multi-taskers on an Oliphantine scale – and more about finding a congenial field that is sufficiently "of the moment" to feel worthwhile, as recovering Oliphant and others was to me. You will also be expected to engage with the wider public, and prove "impact" for your work. Issues of race and diversity have "dual nationality," as it were, both in the nineteenth century and the twenty-first, but there will always be new urgencies that can be discussed with wider audiences. Even in pandemic conditions, we have all the advantages of technology which favour social sharing of this kind.

Above all, enjoy writing, if you can, and keep refining it. Academic writing may seem less creative than writing fiction, but as Oliphant indicates, it should be just as pleasurable, both for us as writers, and for others as readers. One of her last works, her short story "The Library Window" (1896), which celebrates both the pleasures of reading and writing, seems at first to step back from her earlier celebration of Agnes

Atheling's creativity, in that the young narrator watches a ghostly man writing alone instead of herself becoming a published author. Her Aunt Mary, however, sees her as someone who "could do two or indeed three things at once – both read and listen, and see" (2000: 365). This is essentially what Oliphant did, if without her speaker's supernatural gift of second sight. If so, my final piece of advice would be, not just to nurture those essential skills of productivity and multi-tasking which we all need now, but also to make time for exercise and fresh air, or just lying fallow for a while. I don't think Oliphant was much of a walker, but for me that is what gives me permission to "listen and see" before I write.

Current Challenges and New Areas of Exploration in the Field

We have clear goals for what *Key Popular Women Writers* should achieve and how we want to expand the field. As outlined in our series description, what this series offers academics, students, and the wider public community is a series of single author monographs that are

"inspired by, [that] interrogate[...] and speak[...] to a new wave of feminism, new definitions of sex and gender, and new considerations of intersectionality [which] also reflects growing interest in popular fiction, and a feminist desire to broaden and diversify the literary canon."
(Hatter and Ifill 2017)

Catherine Pope in her section above makes the case for academics and students to work on previously undiscovered women writers, instead of writing about canonical authors, because it gives more space for developing new critical perspectives and lines of arguments, and helps to expand the canon.

There are obstacles on this path, however, especially when publishing considerations are factored in. Whereas Roe, in the 1980s, had to ask herself how her chosen authors, with their "established places in the mainstream of the literary tradition" could "be regarded as feminist" (1986: vii), we have had to ask ourselves whether our choice of women writers will be "popular" enough by modern critical standards to justify publishing a monograph. We do not mean "justify" in the sense of deciding whether or not a woman writer is good enough, or worthy enough of study, but (sadly) whether she is widely known enough for our publisher to risk the time and money that goes into publication – pressures that have only increased during 2020-21 as the coronavirus pandemic continues (at the time of writing) to affect businesses, academia and libraries. Therefore, just as Abigail Burnham Bloom above discusses the conflicting reputation of popular women writers then and now, and the pressures they experienced from publishers, she also highlights the similar constraints that academics work under today with the current academic publishing model. As series editors, we have felt this pressure too, and this with a publisher who believes fervently in the worth of popular fiction and the importance of sharing and studying it (hence John Spiers's desire to revive the series, and his eagerness to support our focus on popular writers). Unfortunately, we have had to reject proposals for monographs that would serve an important role in bringing under-studied popular genres and social groups to light – and would shed light on transnational, intersectional and minority popular writing – because librarians and book distributors have said they simply would not buy them.

Key Popular Women Writers is thus not immune from the dilemma at the heart of our discipline. We aim at uncovering forgotten popular women writers from all eras and backgrounds, to tell their stories and examine their impact on the world, but if they are not “popular enough” to sell then we cannot go forward with the text.

How can we, as actors in our field, reconcile this dilemma? We need a balance – a balance between re-evaluating women writers we already think of as recognisable, but not yet firmly in the literary canon, like Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, Ouida, Daphne Du Maurier and Edith Wharton. These authors are undoubtedly an easier “sell,” and new approaches to their work still offer an invaluable critical contribution, and can reveal insightful interconnections within the networks of women writers and the publishing, social, political and aesthetic circles they moved within (and were sometimes excluded from). This needs to be balanced with more recently re-discovered women writers (or still completely unrecovered women writers) like Emily Feake Bridges or Emma Robinson, who may not yet be names familiar to academics, let alone households. To strike this balance we need to draw these more obscure names into dialogue with other non-canonical and canonical authors to at least get them into the conversation (see King 2019 for one methodological approach to enact this). Although it has been dispiriting not to be able to accept some promising proposals, we are heartened by the fact that we are not alone in our endeavours to broaden, diversify and promote feminist popular fiction studies. Journals such as *Victorian Popular Fictions*, *Women’s Writing* and *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (see specifically their 2020 special issue on “Victorian Literature in the Age of #MeToo”), and conferences such as those of the Victorian Popular Fiction Association (VPFA) and the International Centre for Victorian Women Writers (ICVWW), allow for the dissemination and publication of papers and articles on little-known popular authors who may – one day – carry enough weight to be featured in a monograph (and hopefully the economic situation will improve, giving us more freedom to produce books that are less financially secure).

Consider, for instance, Mary Elizabeth Braddon. When we began our undergraduate studies in the 2000s, Braddon was an author who had gained some critical attention but the study of whom it was still necessary to justify and sometimes defend. Since then, Braddon has become a solid fixture on many undergraduate survey courses, specialist postgraduate modules, and is even on the British A-Level syllabus at secondary schools (Holt 2017), with many students coming to university having read *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). This shows why working on these popular women writers is important even when it may seem like an uphill battle, as writers who are still on the peripheries of the literary canon can and do permeate the educational landscape at multiple levels. We hope that this will become true of other authors who are now little read – of course the women writers currently in our series, and many others too.

While we need to make space in our studies for these undiscovered or rediscovered writers, we also need to make space for ourselves as women academics. As Carolyn Lambert writes above, we need to transform the practice of authors of making a “room of one’s own” into a methodological practice for academics as well, showcasing how our own writing practices shape our disciplines. This is not just true for writing during the coronavirus pandemic, where finding the time and space to concentrate on research and writing is scarce. So far, patterns are suggesting that there is a polarised research culture around the gendered dimensions of publishing, with women academics publishing fewer single authored papers due to increased caring responsibilities as compared to their male counterparts (Flaherty 2020),

which will ultimately adversely affect career progression, recruitment, university rankings and associated funding (“Editorial: Research and higher education in the time of COVID-19” 2020: 583). This data is only on published works as well: works-in-progress will have similarly been impacted. Previously, talks (many of which are ongoing) of “breaking the academic glass ceiling” for the progress of women academics have centred on examining institutional power structures, the gender pay gap, the gendered professorial gap, intersectionality and bias, along with enacting change-making leadership in spite of these barriers (Bonomi and Rennison 2019). While much work has been done around mentoring programmes, networking, negotiation of pay and work-life balance for women academics, it seems things are set to take a back turn due to the pandemic, which will take a considerable amount of time, effort and resources to undo. It is not just up to universities and funding bodies to do this though: academic organisations, associations and groups all play their part in making sure we as women academics take our rightful space in our fields (as we should legroom on the train).

We also need to recognise more fully our own biases when it comes to the rediscovery work we do. Carol Poster noted 25 years ago that the process of oxidization is a feminist issue because while we, as late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century feminists theorise about Victorian popular women’s writing, unrecovered texts “printed on acid paper crumble into permanent and irretrievable oblivion” (1996: 289). The very authors and texts we have not yet recovered, not yet named and catalogued, let alone read, are the ones which will be lost. So, we echo and signal-boost Poster’s call to digitise or otherwise preserve these books, authors and stories now, so that they will be available for future researchers. With technological developments over the past 25 years, this process should be easier and cheaper, meaning more popular fiction can be saved and made more widely available.

There is also the potential bias of our own modern-day intersectional feminist stance to account for. This is because, as mentioned above, some (Victorian) women writers can initially appear, or were indeed, outright, anti-feminists (not to mention classists and racists). But it is our job to bring these complex, often contradictory, issues to the fore. We need not shy away from areas of our authors’ lives and works that do not meet our own modern-day standards of intersectional feminism; instead, we can examine and understand what they offered to their own communities. These conversations need starting, even if they later need to move on.

The obstacles facing the reclamation of more obscure popular women writers may feel overwhelming, but the first steps are simple: share their work and help to get them read. We do not mean share just in academia for research and impact purposes – though forgotten women writers are fertile ground for meeting the demands of funding bodies (like the British REF system) due to their understudied nature and the many social, political and aesthetic issues they comment upon. Nor do we mean sharing just for teaching (TEF) purposes by creating modules around (Victorian) popular fiction, though setting just one new text on an established course can help, as popular fiction as a genre attracts excellent student engagement due to its non-canonical status, supposed plot-driven narratives, and “easier” writing styles. Studying popular fiction also encourages students to stop seeing their own leisure reading as a “guilty pleasure.” We mean that progress can be measured in smaller steps, like lending a book to a colleague, or recommending an author or text during a conference Q&A session. But beyond this too, we need to engage in local reading groups and other public engagement and knowledge exchange (KEF) events where an author or text’s local connections or wider-world implications can be drawn out.

We teach what we research; we research what we read. Thus, reading is the main thrust of our interdisciplinary studies and should be the focus by which obscure writers become recognisable names.

The way we read is just as important as what we read. We are privileged to live in an age that is getting more “woke,” and reading popular fiction through an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) lens opens up new pathways into popular writers’ works and how we can appreciate their lived experiences. Reading groups such as the VPFA’s “The Third Sex” group encourage engagement with new ideas, themes, texts, authors and developments in the field as a means of broadening attendees’ horizons.⁵ As the *Key Popular Women Writers* series is committed to enhancing its specifically feminist approach, with attentiveness to intersectionality and wider EDI concerns, it is exciting to see this type of reading taking place, and these kinds of discussions happening, as they are key to the development of progressive research, writing and publication.

One need only take a glance at our current cultural landscape to see that there are many other EDI areas beside sex and gender to keep exploring. Both Costantini and Sanders above note that some of the most recent and important developments in literary studies are calls (spurred on by the Black Lives Matter movement) for the decolonisation of the curriculum. The related movement of “Undisciplining Victorian Studies” – which also started off as reading groups, roundtables, conference panels and informal conversations (Chatterjee, Christoff and Wong 2020: 371) – aims at illuminating “how race and racial difference subtend our most cherished objects of study, our most familiar historical and theoretical frameworks, our most engrained scholarly protocols, and the very demographics of our field” (370), calling us to interrogate our field from its very core. Along with Christina Sharpe (2016) from whom they take the phrase “undisciplining,” the related group, “Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom,” has created positive, race-conscious open-access resources of lesson plans, peer-reviewed syllabi and Zoomcasts for academics across the world to use in order to further their related aims of fostering the application of innovative, interdisciplinary teaching approaches to Victorian-era literatures and cultural objects of all kinds, and introducing less-studied, global, Victorian-era writers, artists, and communities into the classroom (Bauer, Fong, Hsu and Wisnicki 2021). The British Association for Victorian Studies (BAVS) also created a list of resources in different media as a “starting point for the Victorianist” (Memel, Shaikh and Taylor 2020), while the reading group for the VPFA’s 13th annual conference in 2021 is entitled “Against the Grain: Reparative Readings for Victorian Popular Fiction,” hosted by Jesse Erickson. Sharing our resources, expertise and perspectives all help to bring our field closer to an equality of representation, which is what *Key Popular Women Writers* strives to contribute to.

There are layers upon layers of peripheries when it comes to EDI issues that are encompassed within intersectional feminism that have yet to come to the forefront of our discipline. For instance, besides sex, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, there is space and geography. We also need re-examination of how areas such as disability, mental health, age, religion and belief, and class, interact with each other. In our field, we need to

⁵ Hosted by Mollie Clarke, Matthew Crofts, Helena Esser and Claire O’Callaghan, “The Third Sex” reading group aims at examining “Victorian and neo-Victorian works that explore sex and gender, queerness, and LGBTQA+ identities” (VPFA Reading Group 2020), through various texts, theoretical structures and media. The name is taken from Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Berlin’s Third Sex* (1904).

consider not just the angle from which to study these women writers, and which writers and texts to uncover, read and champion, but also who does the reclamation work and leads the parade. There are as many approaches to our field as there are individuals working within it. As an interdisciplinary field, we need to welcome the voices of academics with diverse identities and backgrounds, and expand our discipline based on what they have to say whenever they feel able to offer their input.

Apart from content, there is huge opportunity, if not necessity, in challenging, changing and expanding our research methods. We can consider new genres of the “popular,” such as letter writing, recipe books, travel writing (Costantini 2020b) and other ephemera, as well as popular fiction’s reputation and circulation in other countries and languages. Costantini above champions this call that the Victorian popular fiction canon needs to expand its international reputation; it is a more established field in the UK and the USA, while other countries, such as her own Italy, do not engage with it so much. Methodologically speaking, literary studies as a discipline is predominantly qualitative; we read and interpret words, books and texts (as well as visual, print and material culture) via close textual analysis, auto/biographical methods, ethnography, archival and oral history methods, interviews and creative writing practice (Griffin 2013). But what about quantitative methods? Can we quantify Victorian popular women’s writing, publishing, sales and readership networks? There is a considerable body of work like Alexis Weedon’s 2003 largely quantitative study (which makes for revealing reading about Wilkie Collins and Ouida) and Stephen Colclough and Weedon’s 2010 edited collection on nineteenth-century book history (in which quantification plays a large part), and Digital Humanities and corpus linguistic analysis have both opened up new possibilities. But as a discipline we could integrate them further into our research, teaching and knowledge exchange to help us see the “bigger picture.”

The reviews of the *Key Popular Women Writers* series so far extol our contributors’ ability to balance the (usually quite large) body of work by the author, with pertinent literary, social, historical, political and aesthetic considerations in order to highlight the complex, and often contradictory, nature of the author’s own work and their disparate views on the Woman Question. As Felipe Espinoza Garrido notes, “the historical neglect of Victorian popular fiction entailed the loss of a decidedly gendered, political consciousness, often disseminated by and strictly for women.” This gendered political consciousness needs to be reclaimed. Garrido notes specifically of *Florence Marryat* that Pope’s “nuanced appraisal of the women’s rights questions that permeate Marryat’s writing ... recasts Marryat as a central progenitor to the late Victorian women’s movements” (2020: 904-5). Scott C. Thompson agrees that Costantini also “recovers Ellen Wood from the one-dimensional image of a conservative, market-oriented female novelist and replaces it with a multidimensional portrait of a subversive author who challenged Victorian social norms from a covert position within the middle-class literary marketplace” (2020: 903), which is similar to Katie Baker’s acknowledgement that Sanders “locates Oliphant as ‘simultaneously insider and outsider’ (2), and as a critical voice in a changing age” (2021: 1). The reviewers here all note the virtues both our contributors and their chosen authors demonstrate, which we must keep aspiring to as critics: challenging norms, embracing the multi-faceted nature of our field and taking our place on the landscape.

Overall, the importance of performing the study of popular fiction cannot be underestimated. Our field pushes the interdisciplinary boundaries of (Victorian) literature and culture, as well as methodological and pedagogical practice. As one small angle of the wider “popular fiction” field, what we are hoping to achieve with *Key Popular Women Writers* is a series that addresses the multifaceted remit of intersectional feminism for

a range of popular women writers. Study of these women, their lives, works and contexts, is important because they offer alternative perspectives, challenge notions of “literary value,” widen the canon and can positively influence readers from a range of ages and backgrounds. While there are many obstacles to overcome in order to achieve these aims, this article has sought, through its discussion of women’s writing and writing practices, both popular and academic, to offer practical ways to move the field forward, and to argue that, the more we read, teach and research (Victorian) popular women writers, the richer our world will become.

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