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FEMALE READERS IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL



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I.

Female Authorship and Readership

If twenty-first-century readers are inclined to believe that popular women-writers such as Charlotte Brontë were not treated with suspicion and hostility by their contemporaries, they are certainly under a false illusion. Robert Southey voices, in 1837, when women's contribution to the burgeoning success of the novel began to be significantly accepted, a common nineteenth-century belief around the amateurish sociology of women's fertile intellect and suitability to scholarship: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life", he sermonizes, "and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity" (Gaskell 160). Southey's comments merely draw our attention to and reassert a long-standing polemical debate regarding women's literary practices and capacity for intellectual mental labor in a period in which the male-dominated public world of Victorian culture raised an eyebrow over female writing and reading. To penetrate the public sphere and lift themselves onto an even pedestal with men, women like Charlotte Brontë – at best seen as second-rate members of the society – would allow themselves to be swept away by intellectual aspirations and try to earn their living by their pen.

Nineteenth-century women's writing careers – viewed retrospectively – constituted the 'best case scenario' in the tumult of the Victorian public world, when seen alongside the frivolity of young women superficially educated, either having no real career prospects or being treated as skilled auxiliary assistants to the needs of men – sons, husbands, brothers and fathers. Thus, indulging in imaginative productions remained women's guaranteed path to a literary vocation, as shown in *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (1999) in which, from the conveniently constructed index of women authors, one-third are chronicled as novelists, 50% as writers of children's literature and a very small percent is dedicated to poets and women with external concerns such as history and economics. Women's assiduous scholarship and urge to write fiction, cultivated through self-instruction rather than by birth, thus, represented a different paradigm of learning with its visible output. For most, it merely

reflected necessity to a greater degree than volition. This might suggest that women, often thrown into their own resources and deprived of chances at formal education, not only had limited career options, but could not draw on anything other than a scanty knowledge of the world, as compared to the vast experience and expertise of men, who were not seen as an appendage to a class and could enjoy different relations with educators, publishers and members of the Victorian society at large.

Charlotte Brontë's humbly disclosed to Elizabeth Gaskell that she deemed Southey's *obiter dictum* "kind and admirable" though "a little stringent (E. C. Gaskell 161). One fact remains: the Victorians ideologically consonant with Southey's view of literary women did not keep her from fabricating some of the most intellectually sophisticated female minds (noble through cultivated reading rather than by birth or education) in Victorian fiction: in *Jane Eyre*, Edward Rochester does not scornfully dismiss Jane Eyre's mind, but acknowledges it as his treasure; Lucy Snowe's sharp mind in *Villette* surprises readers with her judicious assessment of her patriarchal community, while Shirley Keeldar's refreshingly forceful intellect in *Shirley* likewise transforms her community. In fact, most of the female characters analyzed in this book act out and express their values in terms which do not fit the ideas of either self-instructed sentimental young ladies brought up in the privacy of their bucolic homes or formally-educated governesses and tutors, with half-grown knowledge resources drawn from uncritical readings of the Bible, conduct books, and moral tales. Their own output (their liberty of thought and action, the way they speak and write, their decision-making powers, their beliefs, inner thoughts, and the manner in which they pass on knowledge) gives proof of a type of creative talent¹ which the conventional Victorian female

¹ In *The Rustle of Language* (1986), Roland Barthes distinguishes between three ways in which reading matter can determine its active consumers to indulge in imaginative production. According to the first type, readers develop what Barthes calls "a fetishist relation with the text being read", i.e. they develop a ludic attitude towards print matter in the imaginative game of make-believe their author sets up (as the prattling child does at an early age) and derive pleasure from reading. Moments of negligence might inevitably arise, which leads readers to neglect certain areas and misunderstand the text, ultimately, as a unified whole. The second reader versus text nexus directly opposes the first reading-for-entertainment type. It assumes a "reader (...) drawn onward *through* the book's length by a force more or less disguised, belonging to the order of suspense" (Barthes 40). The events and the text's hidden meanings are to be disclosed. If the first is deemed by Barthes a metaphoric or poetic type of reading, the second is believed to contain "the metonymic pleasure of all narration" (40). Creative reading, Barthes argues, signals the reader's potential output, for a "pure reading which does not call for another writing is incomprehensible" (41). Reading, thus, is a prerequisite of creative writing. The readings of the various female characters who populate the pages novels in the Victorian age are, too, cross-disciplinary. Despite their deliberate exclusion from formal instruction, they still indulge in reading as an intrinsically-motivated activity. Like children taking an interest in speaking for the pleasure they derive from it, women similarly approach reading with ludic instruments.

education system certainly did not nurture. Though women's reading was not encouraged within their close family network or larger social environment, it still asserted itself over time and allowed women to navigate the turbulent seas of Victorian life.

The lives and times of the non-fictitious, historically attested Jane Eyres and Shirley Keeldars testify the real work possibilities of most unmarried Victorian women who, similarly to "almost every respectable lady who was forced to earn her own living" (Brandon 5), described themselves as governesses in the 1851 census. Governessing has roots that belong to the distant past. Customarily, governesses were recruited by aristocratic families to take up residence in their houses and instruct their daughters. However, the nineteenth century witnessed a shift in common home-schooling practices, which had far-reaching implications for all the parties involved. The newly-hatched English middle classes employed governesses to educate their daughters in an effort to emulate aristocratic lifestyles and avoid the potential etiquette gaffes of their offspring in polite society. While working-class women could take jobs as servants or in the rapidly-flourishing factories, middle-class women were hard-pressed to succumb to the inevitable and accept a governess post to preserve their gentility – while facing financial strains – and lead an existence far from anything off the charts. Such women decided to ply their trade to support their families. Their existence was not only of minor importance in the cultural consciousness of the era by virtue of their gender, it was also poverty-stricken.

For novelists, the figure of the governess was a providential gift, furnishing an exquisite entrée into the Victorian world with all its frailties, rancor, doubts, restraints and false alarms. Women were, once again, relegated from the real world and pushed into a marginal position, but ennobled by suffering and loomed large in their society's literature. The fictional Jane Eyre and Shirley Keeldar both succumb, in the end, to marriage – the first falls in love with her rich master, the second is charmed by a penniless tutor. Indeed, the governess' career path might have been precisely fashioned to suit fictional narratives. Her collapse from bourgeois well-being to an ambiguous status, as well as her prolonged journey to its prospective financial and emotional breakdown, supplied authors with a propitious dramatic framework and a plethora of narrative storylines.

How could the soon-to-be governess hit rock bottom? How would she – only partially educated and not sent to high-class boarding schools – teach other children within the homes of her employers? How could she resolve the inevitable tensions ready to burst in her masters' household? Would she find a husband – since her education was, from the beginning, meant to render her marriageable – to keep her at a remove from the servant

class? Would she continue to live independently and find her own way back into a reasonable middle-class life? Such questions permeated the pages of many Victorian novels – other than *Jane Eyre*, *Agnes Grey*, *Vanity Fair* and *The Turn of the Screw* – inhabited by governesses and describing their internal struggles. Most of the reading heroines of Victorian novels vindictively refused to submit to common disciplinary measures in diverse ways because of *what* and *how* they read. The alternative – the Victorian social institution of marriage – embedded the famous French notion of *feme covert*², introduced by Sir William Blackstone. Thus, the woman's "very being or legal existence (...) [was] suspended during the marriage, or at least (...) incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband" (Blackstone 1) at a time when, ironically, upbringing and society as a whole already stood so bitterly at cross purposes with her.

Victorian women's way of exercising literacy and constructing female characters enamoured with fiction provided the impetus for the intellectual autonomy of professional women. Tracing the history of the debate over women's education from its origins to its roots, one can see that female authorship and readership, along with public accounts of the enactment of such practices, were also subjected to what has been categorized as threats. Female authorship and readership spurred the blossoming of safeguards against the instruction of women, be it formal or informal. The didactic potential of fiction penned by both men and women as a split-half answer to questions regarding printed texts as nugatory or purposeful engages two directions, echoing the long line of medical literature, periodicals, essays and propaganda literature addressing this dilemma *per se*. Could and should the reading habits of those with minds uninstructed by experience gainsay the possibility of fiction to educate individuals – women in particular – without veering them away from virtues such as humility, chastity, obedience and silence? These questions lend themselves to no facile answers, although they frame the minds and the dilemmas of nineteenth-century novelists who set forth to include quarrelsome, independent-minded female characters in their fiction.

On the one hand, even long before the nineteenth century and especially after it, female learning was attacked, treated with humor and ridiculed in comic and satiric plays such

² *Coverture* is used here as a label attached to the legal disabilities of women engaged in a marital contract. On the one hand, the husband could be held responsible for any crimes committed by his wife in his presence and bound by lawful agreements made between the wife and a third party. On the other, as a consequence, the right of the husband to inflict punishment on his wife was completely acceptable and captured the essential, patriarchal nature of the law. The laws of coverture in nineteenth-century marriages had serious implications detrimental to women in terms of property rights, testamentary consent and civil liability. If actions were to be brought to the wife as a *feme sole*, she could still be "taken in execution and imprisoned, even though she married before judgement was given against her" (43), as explained by Maeve E. Doggett in his 1993 study.

as Thomas Wright's *The Female Virtuoso* (1721), Pope's *Dunciad* (1733) and Thomas Horde's *The Female Pedant* (1782), among others. On the other hand, women were also deemed worthy of education (although limited to certain parameters and behavioral codes) in Sarah Fyge's *Female Advocate* (1618), Judith Drake's *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1638, 1696, 1697) or in Duncombe's *The Femineead: or, Female Genius* (1757). The pattern continued well into the Victorian period, when the expansion of the periodical and advancements in publishing contributed to the ever-growing printed matter extending upon Anna Maria Van Schurman's debate about whether or not a "maid" should ever project herself onto the situation of texts and exhibit no timid reservation about her education and independence in *The Learned Maid or, Whether a Maid May Be a Scholar* (1659).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, novels, whether serialized or published whole, grew in popularity and furnished – both complicit with and repellent of female readership – burdened and conflicted ideas about learned women. Raftery, in *Women and Learning in English Writing, 1600-1900* (1997) denounces the ancillary identity of women, who deliberately started devouring literature – trivial literary trash or light literature – in search for ludicrously pernicious ideas. The reading taste prominent among the members of an anonymous, phantasmal and overwhelming female reading public (or what would superficially be assessed as such) came to support a deflationary view of fiction and reinforce the stereotypes of the "plain spinster" and the "female pedant" (Raftery 87). Who could infer, patronizingly, that they were more than second-class figures in the society, by the power vested in them by improper fiction? It would have meant to challenge age-old notions of female roles and cast an odd aura of excitement around changing patterns of social and cultural authority.

The learned woman in literature served either as a victim of tawdry novels or as a devotee of fabricated constructs inevitably condemned to ridicule, poverty and loneliness. To fault women for finding the means to improve their mental condition and, thus, to sow the seeds of restlessness and nip them in the bud, representations of heroines in literature served as a *caveat lector* to those who would wrongly assume to sit enthroned on an educational tripod dedicated entirely to men by virtue of superior power and intellect. Was there anything to be done for women readers to court public favor and stop being seen as the Cinderellas of class society, along with working-class readers, whose literacy practices *needed* to be tamed and disciplined? Perhaps a generous compromise could have been reached for women's agonized plea to become and to be seen as judicious readers. Herein lies the source of inspiration for novelists of the time and the debate around the suitability of women for education.

As it turns out, women's fritting away their lives in trivial textual pleasures eventually came to be accepted if for no other reason than their inborn ability to place their minds in the service of men's wishes – most fictional female readers described in this book do this, in fact, although they embark, eventually, on a journey from silent reading to active, creative processes in diverse reading and writing arenas, indicating the positive socio-political benefits of novel-reading and novel-writing in the larger areas of history. Twenty-first century readers are most vividly conscious of this journey parading before their eyes. Female characters in the pages of Victorian fiction are subversive in unexpected ways, defiant in their wishes to place themselves far from a corrosive ennui, sterile marriages and educational crumbs designed solely to render them appealing to the marriage market.

How could Victorian critics understand the new reading patters of fictional young readers (e.g., Jane, Catherine, Maggie, Dorothea and Dinah) who take up reading as a solitary activity, when their forebears had only been habituated with few collectively readable texts, such as the Bible? Reading as an intense, solitary activity was problematic for several reasons. Becoming engrossed in a book's contents was synonymous with the idea of individuated subjecthood, over-absorption in reading, counterproductive leisure, a too-intimate relation with the printed text, a whole body *rendez-vous*. Reading out loud, however, had long been considered a collective reading effort under the watchful eyes of paternal or societal figures of surveillance, responsibility and control. The solitary, ludic reader privately involved with texts, alas, challenged the fine line between imaginative absorption (confined not only to reading fiction but applicable to music, nature, religion, as well) and hypnotic susceptibility.

Josephine Hilgard, in her 1970 *Personality and Hypnosis*, made a clear-cut distinction between involvement and absorption in her comprehensive study of imagination and its link to personality and involvement. An involved reader is one that enters into a fictional world with unabated excitement and sides emotionally with characters in a mimetic, make-believe way, whereas an absorbed reader is able to disaffiliate himself from the fiction at hand – both imaginatively and intellectually. The novels consumed by the female characters analyzed in this book command intense and intensive reading and generate absorption. They are not educated to distinguish between the steady meaning of a text and the variability of its significance (largely dependent on cultural context, education, background). In their reading, multiple misunderstandings may arise partly because they are undertaking involved reading (which is what every reader does on a first reading) and partly because their educators paid scant attention to the female characters' critical reading skills – to what a formally-instructed reader

might need in order to construct, reconstruct and deconstruct subjective images of texts with the rational and committed patience of a jigsaw-puzzle explorer.

Most Victorians viewed novel-reading to be deadening alike to the heart and the mind. Analogously, today's society is morbidly worried about the use of technology and media. Today's inveterate readers take for granted that libraries and bookstores should function as academic reservoirs of primary and secondary sources of literature. However, for the Victorians, the library acquisition of works of fiction was the subject of much debate and disagreement. There was much evidence presented during the debates part of the Public Library Act hearings of 1850 to support the fact that libraries, with schooling and literacy-acquiring efforts joining in the chorus, would enact a source of educational provision, instructing even working-class readers to develop the capacity of reasoned judgement and to wean them off the predilection for booze, crimes and immorality. Libraries were, opponents of novel-reading also sermonized, much more inclined to encourage idleness and flawed romantic fantasies (and, hence, sparking and fueling promiscuous behavioral tendencies) in female bibliophiles.

In particular, the figure of the "Female Quixote" looms as a monolithic representation of learned women to whom *le plaisir de texte* compromised their femininity and rendered them less attractive to men and ill-prepared for marriage. This appellation earned by women originates in Charlotte Lennox's 1752 novel, *The Female Quixote; or, The Adventures of Arabella*. The Quixote pattern in fiction usually entails the potentially corruptive efficacy of fiction to make readers identify with the characters and plots in chimerical stories. As early as the 1600s, novel-readers were gendered female and books were viewed as the *sine qua non* of women's journey down the slippery slope to idleness and adultery. The silent and occult exchange of reading was giving way to a novel's augmentation of mimetic processes.

Just as novels took an abiding interest in real life and built a replica of its intricacies, impressionable women readers, likewise, imitated what they read – albeit involuntarily – and fused with fictional characters imaginatively, *becoming* what they read. The motif of dangerous reading is particularly rife in fiction running straight towards and through the nineteenth century, in works such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan's comedy, *The Rivals* (1775), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), most of George Eliot's novels, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871) and Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), to mention only a few.