

Wilkes, Joanne. *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Critical Reception of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. x, 183 pp. \$99.00.

Women novelists came of age in nineteenth-century England, but so did female reviewers and literary journalists, says Joanne Wilkes in *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. However, because those female reviewers have received little scholarly attention, Wilkes undertakes to redress that imbalance in an engaging and detailed study that focuses on Maria Jane Jewsbury, Sara Coleridge, Hannah Lawrance, Jane Williams, Julia Kavanagh, Anne Mozley, Margaret Oliphant, and Mary Augusta Ward. The book will interest a wide audience of scholars since it offers insights into the works of the canonical giants mentioned in the subtitle as well as evaluation practices in the nineteenth century, especially as it relates to female authors and female reviewers. In fact, Oliphant, Kavanagh, and Ward were themselves novelists.

As we know, female journalists and reviewers moved within a patriarchal and sexist society; thus, they had to navigate a difficult path as writers. Should they publish anonymously or should they reveal their gender? How could they modulate their comments so as not to be attacked themselves as “unnatural” women while still suggesting that women writers can be accomplished artists and thinkers? How did their personal views about female nature and proper roles for women affect their literary judgments?

These women did their work in a milieu that postulated vast differences in male and female natures. It was accepted that female novelists possessed powers of observation (it seems women have always been credited with being good at details), and that they might offer insight into female characters, but they were seen as lacking originality and intellectual power. Worst of all was the threat of women becoming “defeminized” by trying to take on male roles. This threat hung over the reviewers as well as the novelists they wrote about. It is not surprising that women (especially Jewsbury and Coleridge) internalized cultural attitudes and suffered from feelings of guilt over ambitions for fame or untraditional behavior.

Reviewers at the time frequently observed texts through the lens of gender, and there was a tendency to discuss work in terms of masculine and feminine qualities. Women participated in the discussion, sometimes implicitly claiming for women larger artistic and substantive achievements and sometimes arguing that some women novelists had both feminine and masculine qualities. They were at pains to identify what was distinctive about women’s writing and most agreed that women novelists can do things men cannot do, excelling in representation of the inner lives of women and subtlety of characterization. Jane Williams had a particular horror of “masculine” women but insisted that women could combine masculine and feminine qualities and pointed to examples such as Charlotte Brontë to prove her point (while providing a defense of Brontë as sufficiently womanly by describing her faithfulness to household duties).

Some women welcomed the convention of the anonymous review, quite common until 1860 especially. They could take advantage of the freedom of anonymity, benefit from disguise, and cultivate a voice—even a male one. Anne Mozely commented in a letter to publisher John Blackwood on her pleasure in the freedom she gained through anonymity. She was concerned especially that certain topics, such as religion, were off limits to women, since a woman writing on these subjects would not be taken seriously (not to mention the problem that no reviews by women were accorded the respect of reviews by men).

Maria Jewsbury’s appreciation of the convenience of a persona helped her understand Jane Austen’s persona. She implicitly challenged Henry Austen’s account of his sister,

suggesting that the novelist put more of her lively personality into the perceptions in her novels than she was able to give voice to in the circumscribed life of a gentlewoman. The woman reviewer might feel constrained to tone down her personal views in some way or to seemingly endorse prevailing views, but she could include a sub-text that suggested women's abilities were greater than commonly allowed. Using a male persona and ostensibly supporting traditional values, Mozley also suggests that such values place unnecessary limitations on the role of women.

Publications in the great age of the journal chronicled by Wilkes claimed that the voices of individual writers were subsumed in the distinctive voice of the journal. That kind of journalism gave women freedom but could also cause editorial tinkering that was less than welcome to the writers. John Lockhart, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, removed favorable comments on Keats entirely from an article by Sara Coleridge because of his disagreement with the author about the poet.

While the women reviewers all agreed about women's eminence in the novel form, they did find faults in women novelists. Sara Coleridge, daughter of the famous poet, presents the paradox of a highly educated woman (with knowledge of Latin and Greek texts in the original) with deep conflicts about publication because she had learned well her father's lesson about the evil of being "unwomanly." Her concerns about the imperative of following a feminine path probably explain her reservations about Elizabeth Barrett Browning (whom she considered bombastic) and some other women writers, and the fact that she published little herself. Much of her literary criticism was culled from her letters.

Wilkes does a service to students of reception study by probing the nuances of the reviewing of women that otherwise might be missed. Both genders were concerned with determining what is distinctive in women's writing, but female reviewers often found virtues that men did not. Finding greater literary value in the novels of Austen than the consensus of male reviewers, Jewsbury called attention to the depth of her characters and the moral dimension of the novels, seeing Austen as something more than a mere delineator of surfaces. Kavanagh, Mozely, Oliphant, and Ward recognized that what Austen left out of her fiction arose from deliberate choice, not simply lack of exposure to the world.

The scholarship of this slim volume is very impressive. Documents consulted include manuscript sources. With hundreds of footnotes and an extensive bibliography, the book will be useful as a reference tool. Occasionally the author's comprehensive study ranges across modern scholarship to provide a context and to sharpen some points. Adding to the liveliness of the study, Wilkes brings in occasional reviewers' comments on male writers, such as Oliphant's devastating critique of Hardy's reductive treatment of women characters.

However, Wilkes makes no reference to the body of theoretical work on reception (readers, audiences, construction of literary reputation), and one can wish that she had included that in her wide-ranging comments. In the introduction she cites an anonymous 1860 review linking Austen, Bronte, and Eliot as an early instance of canon formation. Wilkes returns to the matter of canons in her conclusion and asks what nineteenth-century female critics contributed to the critical discourse. She makes the interesting point that there may have been a downside to female critics' work: the focus on relating female novelists to each other may have affected their general standing in the long term. However, the conclusion is largely a summary of her study and slights the issue of influence and canons. One wonders how female critics might have contributed to the canonical status of the three novelists, how far women reviewers nudged the interpretive community to grant these novelists more respect, and what lasting effect they might

have had on how the novelists were read. Perhaps these questions may be the subject of another book.

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