

**Joanne Wilkes, *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Critical Reception of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot* (Ashgate, 2010)**

Ashgate has established a reputation for producing high-quality scholarly monographs, and this recent addition to their catalogue keeps their standard high. In this meticulously researched book, Joanne Wilkes covers new ground on the subject of how three leading nineteenth-century novelists – Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot – were read and reviewed by women critics. It thus sheds light on a specific manner of canon formation and literary history, while showing us that these women

also worked with a strong sense of their own implication in gender-related assumptions about women's writing, and this awareness informed both their choices about disseminating their ideas and their textual self representations (153).

Clearly, then, this is a book about gender and nineteenth-century writing. Its strength, however, is that it is empirical rather than theoretical. For the most part, Wilkes lets the writing of her quarries speak for itself, meaning that this monograph is readable and jargon-free, as well as intelligent. This makes a welcome change from much academic writing.

The women on whom Wilkes focuses vary between those remembered within scholarship only, and those who are virtually forgotten. Maria Jane Jewsbury, Sara Coleridge, Hannah Lawrance, Jane Williams, Julia Kavanagh, Anne Mozley, Margaret Oliphant and Mary Augusta Ward (Mrs. Humphry Ward) have been chosen; there is a deliberate variety here in terms of the writing of the women themselves, and their views on the canonical figures in question, meaning that we can see evidence of much wider cultural assumptions, and contrasting views of the aesthetics, tone and ideologies of the novels in question.

I found Wilkes's knowledge of these women and their lives fascinating. Her project shows that the work begun by Showalter, Moers and Virago Press in the 1970s, where forgotten writers of the past were reconsidered and republished, is still going strong, as it should be. Particularly interesting are the stories of Sara Coleridge's life in the shadow of her famous parent's work, and the extensive historical writing about Queens of England carried out by Hannah Lawrance, a remarkable figure who 'unites the fields of male history and female memoir' (68). With all the writers in question, Wilkes is careful to indicate research that is already extant, while reminding us that there is often very little. Although Oliphant has been much studied, Jewsbury, for example, wrote the first article on Austen by a woman, yet this has barely been considered by academia, as the author notes. Throughout we see evidence of thorough and original research into letters and reviews, including computer programs that have compared anonymous reviews with named writing to find the woman hidden behind them. In terms of critical views of the three novelists, we discover that Jewsbury's writing on Austen was in effect stolen and doctored: her voice was silenced and her ideas 'edited out of critical history' (36). This is

Book reviews: *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-century Britain* by Joanne Wilkes. Nick Turner.

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illustrative of the wider fate befalling the nineteenth-century woman writer, struggling to be heard in a climate hostile to female self-expression.

Anonymity, which many found an answer to this problem, is a key concern of this book. The question of male pseudonyms is a well-known one; less considered are the advantages and disadvantages of anonymous reviewing for the many Victorian periodicals. Wilkes builds on scholarly discussion of the gendered reviewing voices of Margaret Oliphant by considering other figures: Jewsbury was 'highly conscious of the potential constructedness of an authorial persona, and duly performed various personae in her writing' (30); Mozley is shown to adopt 'an overtly masculine voice, one which implies that both she and her readers are male' (91). The criteria of a particular journal may have imposed limits; on the other hand, the anonymity could give women writers expressive freedom. As Wilkes observes,

Women critics understood gender as at least partly performance, adumbrating the perceptions of recent theorists like Judith Butler, who have explored gender as socially constructed and habitually performed, rather than as expressing any ontological essence. (160)

Wisely, Wilkes does not labour the Butler link: it is much more interesting to *see* the women 'performing', as it were, and to see the contradictions in their writing, for Mozley lambasts Charlotte Brontë's heroines for their lack of femininity as well as championing the acceptance of women's writing. A further important question (about which more might be said elsewhere) is that of private writing. For Sara Coleridge, according to Wilkes, the letter was the ideal form in which to write; we still treat this form of literature as trivial and not worthy of attention.

It seems a shame to criticise such good scholarship, but there is something missing, and that is a central line of argument. This is partly caused by the book's structure, for Chapter Three (on Lawrance, Williams and Kavanagh), focussing on women writing about the historical achievements of other women, is excellent and insightful, but distracts a little from the central ideas and figures. Equally, the contradictions Wilkes identifies in the voices of her subjects means that each writer is seemingly torn, both subservient to domestic ideologies and championing women's voices. The effect is of a constant zig-zag between conservative and progressive, when something more definite needs to be articulated. The final thesis seems to be that these writers were constantly seeking the woman behind the fiction when they reviewed, and that, despite evidence of gender performance, notions of delicacy and the importance of the domestic governed. This is not a new claim.

Nonetheless, I came away from Wilkes' book impressed. A reader will be reminded of the constraints and possibilities of the era, and learn a great deal about neglected nineteenth-century women writers. Complete with an excellent bibliography, this is splendid research; and enjoyable, too.

**Nick Turner**

2

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