When I was a teenager, and starting to read hungrily and eclectically, I was plagued by a recurring dream. I'd go into a dusty second-hand bookstore, crammed with disorganized volumes that were spilling off the shelves, piled in heaps on the floor. I'd pick one up – and find an (imaginary) George Eliot novel, or a daring fin-de-siècle narrative, or a complicated mid-Victorian saga full of family tensions. And then, before I could decide quite which I could afford to buy, or locate my purse, or gather them all up in my arms, it would be closing time in the bookstore, and I'd be hustled out, waking up unspeakably frustrated at not being able to remember the names of all these elusive, promising texts and writers.

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* appeared in 1977, my first full year as a graduate student. To open it was to walk into my fantasy bookstore – only this time, the titles and the authors were for real. Reading it again, it's important to recollect the emotions of greedy wonder that it evoked back then, for it's a measure of how great an impact the book has had that much of its material now seems very familiar. This impact was felt on various fronts. First, Showalter's study was a major act of canon-busting – or at least, a decisive intervention when it came to re-drawing the canonical lines. To be sure, certain key women writers, especially Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, received plenty of attention, and I shall return to this. But she also performed a major revivalist campaign on behalf of many authors who had fallen out of popularity and publication. Above all, she did so in a way which made their writings seem urgent to the concerns of the 1970s, however superficially stuffy their plots and values might appear. Certainly, one must acknowledge, for example, the determining effects on their fictions of Charlotte Yonge's piety, or of Eliza Lynn Linton's conservatism concerning gender roles. But Showalter both shows their terrier-like professionalism, and, in what was to prove a highly influential critical insight, saw how the men in their fictions acted as
surrogates for women’s expression of their sexualities, and of their
desires for power.

Showalter’s most influential canonical manoeuvre, however, was to
propel both sensation fiction and New Woman fiction into prominence.
She demonstrated quite how subversive were the messages of Mary
Braddon’s and Ellen Wood’s novels – as well as providing just enough
plot outline to show how much fun they could be to read. Additionally,
she introduced us to the daringly racy heroines of Rhoda Broughton
and Helen Mathers (while also showing how social pressures often
prevented these authors from providing their angry and outspoken
protagonists with any kind of triumphant conclusion); and, albeit with
much less apparent empathy, she introduced us to the range of explicit
feminist interventions to be found in the pages of such writers as Sarah
Grand and George Egerton. For my part, Showalter’s lists of authorial
names, her thumbnail sketches of plots, and her quick, deft run-
throughs of women’s periodicals were not just essential bibliographic
tools when it came to understanding quite how permeated Victorian
fiction was with feminist issues, but they also helped me both pose,
and attempt to answer questions about who exactly was reading all this
material, and what kind of messages they might have derived from it.

* A Literature of Their Own * was a pioneering contribution to the re-
discovery of ‘forgotten’ women writers which was taking place across all
periods in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The year after its publication,
Virago launched their ‘Modern Classics’ series, a list, as the history
on their website explains, which was ‘dedicated to the celebration of
women writers and to the rediscovery and reprinting of their works,
largely guided by the influential *A Literature of Their Own*’ – just as, the
year before, Virago’s ‘Reprint Library’ had been prompted into being
by Sheila Rowbotham’s *Hidden from History*. For a couple of decades,
there was a constant supply of new Victorian titles behind the trademark
green spines – Charlotte Yonge and Margaret Oliphant, Geraldine
Jewsbury and Mrs Humphry Ward. But in addition to providing the
impetus behind this explosion of readily-available women’s writing,
Showalter’s book was extraordinarily influential on how one looked at
more familiar texts. Her lucid articulation of the pressures which
women authors faced, and the degree to which they internalized them,
en确保 that the very quotations which she employed from contem-
porary reviewers and commentators came themselves to hold canonical
status. Nowhere has this been more true than in the evidence which
she culled from mid-Victorian medical sources about the presumed
abnormality or pathology of women’s sexual appetites: even if scholars
such as Michael Mason have done a good deal to complicate the
Revisiting A Literature of Their Own

picture, Showalter's foregrounding of William Acton's 1857 manual, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, had far-reaching consequences. Especially when considering the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Showalter recurrently loops back to a consideration of the impact both on authors, and on the women whom they represented, of what she termed the 'training of Victorian girls in repression, concealment, and self-censorship' (25), in a decidedly pre-Foucauldian version of the repressive hypothesis. The discussion of the female symbolism of the womb-like Red Room in *Jane Eyre*, and of the sexual connotations of Bertha Mason's incarceration anticipated Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's similar explorations in *The Madwoman in the Attic* by two years. If such points now seem clichés of literary criticism, we can assess the changes in feminist study which have taken place over the last thirty years if we recollect how they once seemed highly daring. Other innovative features have proved less enduring, in particular the way in which for Showalter, the Victorian and Modernist period can be arranged into three more or less sequential phases, which she termed 'Feminine, Feminist, and Female' (13), characterized by subordination, protest, and autonomy. Even if this continuum (with its inevitable overlaps) may convincingly be traced in general terms, the more broadly one reads, the more exceptions and awkward, uncategorizable practitioners one encounters: where, for example, might one place Harriet Martineau, or Vernon Lee - barely mentioned by Showalter except as a masculine pseudonym - or Elinor Glyn?

But the book is prescient in other ways. It starts in the 1840s, the period when, Showalter claims, the woman writer began to think of herself as a professional, and progresses, after a discussion of early twentieth-century suffrage fiction, to engage (in terms which have proved highly controversial) with the work of Virginia Woolf. This starting date had provoked debate, too. Catherine Gallagher's *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (1994), explores the financial pressures and challenges faced by women novelists during this earlier period - a period crucial to the establishment of the novel as a dominant literary form, to the professionalization of the author, and the rise of the woman writer - in other words, the pre-history to *Literature*. Gallagher's understanding of the figure of the female writer is not at all dissimilar in its terms of reference to that of Showalter: she sees her as an item of cultural capital, of intellectual property, of image commodification, as (above all) *construct* - one developed in the contexts of publication history, patronage, and publicity - but she examines all these factors at play a century earlier. Yet the very
fact that *Nobody's Story* homes in on the five figures of Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Charlotte Lennox, Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth in fact serves to underscore one of Showalter’s major points: the scale of women’s authorship during the period of which she writes. And here, the question of ‘period’ is important, because in telling her story from the mid-nineteenth century through to the 1930s, she tacitly exemplifies the way in which literary history in fact refuses to be neatly organized by labels of century or reign.

As Showalter now acknowledges, by way of John Guillory, canons are more or less inevitable, but new canons come about as a result of critical revolutions – and unquestionably, her own interventionism has played a major role in reshaping how we approach Victorian literature, both within and outside courses specifically devoted to women’s writing. Indeed, her work is part of the reason that there now are women’s writing courses at all. It has now become almost de rigueur to place such novels as *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *East Lynne* on Victorian syllabi – in part a reflection, too, of a far greater academic interest in popular culture across the board than was the case when Showalter wrote this book. Sensation fiction, in particular, is easy to find in Penguin and Oxford University Press World’s Classics. But – although Broadview Press valiantly puts out a number of fully-annotated editions of novels by lesser known Victorian women – there is now nothing to compare with the astonishing number of titles which Virago brought out in the 1980s, and which have now vanished again from print. It’s almost impossible to find copies of texts like Geraldine Jewsbury’s *Zoe*, or Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage* (which Showalter herself edited for Virago in 1985), except – if one’s lucky – on-line, through such a facility as the Project Gutenberg site. Publishing economics have determined the parameters of the impact of this volume on these syllabi – central though the work of Showalter, and other pioneers of the late 1970s and 1980s has been. But feminist scholarship has continued to build on the issues which Showalter helped launch.

The success of *A Literature of Their Own* has placed Showalter in the privileged position of being able to revisit her own text, when Princeton University Press brought out an expanded paperback edition in 1999 – and she does so both in relation to direct criticism of the book, and, to some extent, to the various subsequent developments in feminist literary study. A new, rather short concluding chapter looks at recent British women’s writing – one looks forward to the next updating of this, not least because it would be good to have Showalter’s take on Sarah Waters’s flamboyant and knowledgeable reworking of Victorian women’s history. In the new Introduction, Showalter not only tackles
the complaints about her starting date, but pre-empts some of the other points that certainly spring to attention when revisiting the book. She locates her position in relation to French feminism, reminding one of the tightly-drawn ideological battlegrounds of the 1980s and early 1990s, when A Literature of Their Own stood as a paradigm (whether for praise or vilification) of ‘Anglo-American’ criticism. As Showalter says, her ‘theoretical questions ... were historical and cultural’ rather than ‘philosophical’ (xix-xx), and, if this is rather too bifurcated a division – for what are issues of justice, for example, if not philosophical ones? – it explains why, given the historical turn in literary studies over the last ten years or so, her work should have continued to wield so much influence.

Showalter acknowledges that if she were writing the book today, she would ‘certainly have a broader comparative base in literary sub-cultures, and in the theories that have emerged around post-colonial studies’ (xx), and her relative silence on these issues is now striking. We are now far more alert to the cultural work performed by the presence of racial others within Victorian fiction: to take a case in point, in discussing Dinah Craik’s Olive, Showalter says of the crippled artist heroine that her ‘deformity represents her very womanhood’ (28), pursuing the motif of woman’s internalization of social strictures, but she makes no mention of her troubled, angry half-sister Christal, the octoroon, whose impact on the plot, and on the manipulation of the emotions of both the characters and the reader, is much more complex and demanding. Although Showalter gives ample space to Olive Schreiner, and must be credited with demonstrating quite how innovative her writing was, she passes over the importance of British women novelists of empire. To encounter Flora Annie Steel and Ada Cambridge only as items in a quick list, with the gloss that they ‘specialized in titillating revelations of exotic native culture’ (67), is completely to belittle their understanding of the racial tensions of the Raj, or of the social unease of settler culture in Australia, respectively. Indeed, A Literature of Their Own is conspicuously island-bound. Not only do the literary politics of empire receive somewhat short shrift, but there’s little sense of any flow of influence to or from Europe: it was Ellen Moers’s Literary Women (1976), another pioneering work in the attention it paid to neglected women writers, which showed, for example, the impact in England of Madame de Stael’s Corinne. Nor are transatlantic literary relations much explored: there is no sense of the connection between abolition and protests against factory conditions, or of the impact, both personal and textual, of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Nor is there any sense of the impact of Judaism on British women’s
writing: Amy Levy merely appears in a litany of suicides, and there is no mention of Grace Aguiar at all. The distance that we have traveled since 1977, in all these respects, may be estimated by the amount of critical attention that Daniel Deronda now receives: Showalter’s George Eliot, by contrast, is primarily the writer of The Mill on the Floss.

In the new Introduction, Showalter writes that now, she ‘would like to be able to give much more emphasis to the 1890s as a transitional period for women’s writing’ (xxvii), and she acknowledges how much experimental and interesting writing appeared, at the fin-de-siècle, in short story form. But despite the fact that she admits that she could, throughout, have problematized the issue of literary realism more, she seems to remain uncomfortable with more daringly ludic forms of prose that were starting to emerge during this period. Writing of Sarah Grand’s The Heavenly Twins, she dismisses the central strange, lyrical, cross-dressing section as ‘a bizarre interlude in which [Angelica] goes about disguised as her brother’ (206): an avoidance of this episode’s thematic and stylistic potential as absolute as her rejection of Woolf’s Orlando as ‘tedious high camp’ (291). Moreover, whatever her notorious caveats about Woolf—especially when she regards her exaltation of androgyny as a serious form of evasion—there are moments when Showalter very closely resembles her predecessor’s recoil from vehement protestations of feminism. ‘Portentous anthems’ (181) is her unsympathetic label for the feminist writings of the 1880s and 1890s, finding them no more successful than those sensational novels of the 1860s and 1870s that, whilst ‘pregnant with their inchoate rage, generally miscarry’, since their authors lack the guts to ‘undertake a radical inquiry into the role of women’ (180). Her problem is that she seems to see such an inability to carry through as failure, rather than as culturally symptomatic, and this is, perhaps, where the book starts to suffer from being about one genre only. This is not to invalidate the importance of tracing the internal history of the novel, of course, but it does mean that in confining herself to a plot-driven genre, Showalter comes to generalizations about the Victorian period that are considerably complicated when one examines how the writing of lyric and symbolic poetry, for example, freed numerous women from the demands of narrative.

Additionally, Showalter gives an account of New Woman fiction that, like so much of this book, is relentlessly—and misleadingly—heterosexual in its bias. It’s not just that she passes a novel like Edith Johnstone’s A Sunless Heart, with its openly lesbian (and very depressing) plot—for that matter, and much more surprisingly, when she turns to the twentieth century, she fails to mention The Well of Loneliness, nor,
Revisiting A Literature of Their Own

despite her interest in Woolf's sexual relations with men, does Vita Sackville-West appear in her pages. Rather, she under-acknowledges all kinds of women's friendships, from (half)-sisterhood to mother-daughter relations (a big theme of the 1980s: Showalter spends more time considering orphans). She writes well about female jealousy and rivalry at the level of literary society, but, despite the appearance of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's ground-breaking 'Female World of Love and Ritual' in the first number of Signs two years before Literature's publication, women's connections with women are all too frequently subordinated to their relationships – unhappy and happy – with men. As with issues of race, we have become much more accustomed to reading against the grain of dominant plot lines, of teasing out the cultural implications of half-submerged references, of looking at the importance of the unsaid as well as of the loudly vocal.

And yet, the very fact that it is now relatively easy to point up the gaps in Showalter's study is testimony to the amount of historically and culturally based feminist literary scholarship that has appeared since 1977. Many of the new questions which one finds oneself asking of her material spring from the fact that feminist and gender studies have been conducted, over the past couple of decades, on truly interdisciplinary ground. So now, one might think about these texts from the point of view of, for example, the potential for tracing transnational connections between women as demonstrated through both fiction and friendships. We may wish to make links between descriptions of interiors or cityscapes and work in material cultures and the poetics and politics of gendered space, or the ethics of liberalism. The rise to prominence of the history of the book allows one to pursue much further the issues that Showalter's history raises about readership, about the interaction of women authors with publishers, and about the complex networks created by magazines and periodicals. Whilst Showalter provides a forcible reminder of the importance of socio-medical discourse, and of the proscriptions to be found in advice manuals, we now engage with such volumes with far greater caution, being increasingly canny in the distinctions we make between rhetoric, belief, ideology, and actual practice.

A Literature of Their Own was both of its moment, and was central in setting an agenda for the next quarter century, and beyond. It's to be regretted that the retrospective pages of the new edition seem to have been at the expense of the appendix which gave socio-bibliographic data for 213 women writers. Even if such resources have been superseded to some extent by, say, the Blain, Clements and Grundy Feminist Companion to Literature in English – and soon, of course, by the emer-
gence of the Orlando Project – it would still have been a great resource for the title-hungry to have had this in the same volume that makes such an eloquent case for their importance. For to revisit *A Literature of Their Own* is, inevitably, to re-encounter, with undeniable nostalgia, the heady atmosphere of literary rediscovery that characterized the late 1970s and the 1980s. Yet it is also to acknowledge a debt: a debt to the pioneering scholarship which announced, quite so compellingly, that there were many reasons why we need to take this vast and varied stock of women’s writing very seriously indeed.

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Endnote


This is the first in an occasional series of essays in which prominent academics will revisit and re-evaluate works which have had a significant influence in Victorian Studies, or which deserve to be more widely known.