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Joanne Wilkes, *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Critical Reception of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 2000. ISBN 978 0 7546 6336 2. £50

The subtitle of Joanne Wilkes' elegant and meticulous monograph is somewhat misleading. Although Austen, Brontë and Eliot make regular appearances, as one would expect the three major female literary figures of the nineteenth century to do, the work does not seek to investigate their critical histories – something which Wilkes has already done in a compelling essay published in Joanne Shattock's collection *Women and Literature in Britain, 1800-1900* (2001). Instead, Wilkes' attention here is firmly directed at the careers of the critics who, for the most part, remain on the margins of Victorian studies: Maria Jane Jewsbury, Sara Coleridge, Hannah Lawrance, Jane Williams, Julia Kavanagh, Anne Mozley, and the better known Margaret Oliphant and Mary Augusta Ward.

Margaret Oliphant lambasted critics who grouped women writers simply on the basis of gender, and grumbled that 'the idea of starting with [Austen] for a criticism on George Eliot is the sublime of absurdity' (p. 127). Perhaps with this warning in mind, Wilkes makes painstaking differentiations between her subjects, who are discussed individually. An appealing consequence of this approach is its ability to display the sheer diversity of nineteenth-century women's writing. For Maria Jane Jewsbury, anonymous reviewing was 'an opportunity to reconcile her desire to publish with her reservations about seeking fame' (p. 43); the more discreet Sara Coleridge's 'constant lauding of the "feminine" in women's lives and writing was in part a way of reassuring herself and others that ... she was still herself "thoroughly feminine"' (p. 55). The historians Lawrance, Williams, and Kavanagh also found that their perceptions of themselves and of their female subjects overlapped. Lawrance felt that women could take on qualities traditionally associated with masculinity, 'such as intellectual powers and political acumen' (p. 83); Kavanagh repeatedly argued that women were to be thanked for introducing into fiction the 'exploration of the inner psychological life' (p. 78), and Williams downplayed both the importance of the poets whose achievements she traced and her own, despite making strong claims for the value of hidden influences.

The sections on Anne Mozley, Margaret Oliphant and, to a lesser extent, Mary Augusta Ward, will be of most interest to George Eliot scholars. Mozley's sense that 'there is nothing in *Adam Bede* so surprising as its authorship' (p. 108) was widely shared, and these chapters deftly bring out the remarkable ambivalence that so many women writers felt about the novelist. Uneasy competitiveness affected Mrs Humphry Ward's stance towards Eliot, who she found old-fashioned despite being forced to acknowledge that 'her own salient success, *Robert Elsmere*, was in some measure attributable to Eliot's example' (p. 156). Oliphant's professional jealousy of Eliot, displayed in her *Autobiography*, is more widely known, and complicated by the fact that her own *Chronicles of Carlingford* had once been attributed to Eliot. Nevertheless, Oliphant was fascinated by the extent to which Eliot revealed herself in her novels, and mined *The Mill on the Floss* for the insight into the novelist which she perceptively felt that Eliot's husband and biographer J. W. Cross had failed to offer. The difficulty of 'pinning down' Eliot's identity also preoccupied Mozley, who famously was the first critic to correctly identify Eliot's gender. In one of the most successful sections of this monograph, Wilkes reveals how Mozley

held rather definitive ideas about gendered writing (the eye for detail, clerical focus, and observational stance mark out the author of *Adam Bede* as a woman) whilst, paradoxically, manipulating the gendered inflexions of her own critical voice with remarkable self-awareness. A High Church female critic posing confidently as a male essayist, Mozley nevertheless expected 'novels to bear the signs of their authors' characters' (p. 109), and was appalled by her discovery not of Eliot's gender but her lack of faith. Together, these sections throw interesting light on the *expectations* that critics projected onto Eliot, and their irritation when these were not met.

The subject of anonymity, which preoccupied critics and novelists alike, runs throughout the work. Alexis Easley's *First-person anonymous: women writers and Victorian print media, 1830-70* (2004) focused on Christian Johnstone, Martineau, Gaskell, Eliot and Rossetti, and Wilkes offers a welcome complementary inquiry into how lesser-known female critics responded to the imposition or choice of anonymity. We are usefully reminded that the fear of seeing their work devalued was at least as powerful a motivation for anonymity as that of being accused of impropriety. Disappointingly, Wilkes does not make the most of one of the consequences of anonymous criticism: the speculations and misattributions that it provoked. The study mentions many of these – from Sara Coleridge's belief that Currer Bell was a man, Oliphant's similar conviction about Eliot, and Eliot's mistaken assumption that Mozley was a clergyman, to G. H. Lewes's misattribution of Jewsbury's essay on Jane Austen to a male critic – but shies from considering how these errors confirm the elusiveness of 'female' writing, or what the obsessive desire to uncover the real 'identity' of authors might suggest about the relationship between Victorian novelists and their public. Indeed, the critics discussed here wished to find a clear relationship between the life and beliefs of female authors and their works, which led them to celebrate the harmony apparent in Austen's life and lament what they saw as the inconsistencies in Eliot's. Yet these same critics submitted to the demands of their editors in a manner that created friction between their beliefs and their publications: as Wilkes skilfully investigates, Sara Coleridge found all references to Keats in her *Quarterly Review* article on Tennyson's *The Princess* removed, Margaret Oliphant's review of Balzac's letters was supplemented with her editor's personal reminiscences of the novelist, and Anne Mozley was pressured by *Blackwood's* to be more hostile to John Stuart Mill than she in fact was.

Wilkes's laudable desire to avoid smoothing over the significant distinctions between her chosen critics, together with the structure of the monograph, make the task of drawing out the major arguments and conclusions of the study a little more strenuous than it ought to be. This, however, is a small blemish in a work that makes thorough use of unpublished letters and manuscripts to convey the sophisticated responses of often overlooked critics to the vexed matter of female authorship.

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