



VICTORIAN WOMEN POETS

AN ANNOTATED
ANTHOLOGY



edited by
Virginia Blain

ROUTLEDGE



VICTORIAN WOMEN POEMS

A New Annotated Anthology

Edited by
VIRGINIA BLAIN

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2001 by Pearson Education Limited

Revised edition published 2009

Published 2013 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

First issued in hardback 2014

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ISBN 13: 978-1-138-83664-8 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-4082-0498-6 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book can be obtained from the Library of Congress

Set by 35 in 9/12pt Stone Serif

VICTORIAN WOMEN POETS

LONGMAN ANNOTATED TEXTS

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H. R. Woudhuysen, University College London
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AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank Daniel Karlin, a General Editor of the series, for his unfailingly generous and knowledgeable help in the preparation of this volume. I would also like to thank the two research assistants who, at different times, have worked with me in the often laborious task of preparing the typescript for printing and searching out obscure footnote material. These are Lee O'Brien (in the early stages of the project) and, over a longer period, Kelly Stephens, whose dedication to the task often helped me when my spirits were flagging, and whose assistance in the final stages was particularly welcome. The Australian Research Council funded a Small Grant which enabled their employment on the project, and for this I am most grateful. I am also grateful to Macquarie University for allowing me a period of study leave during 1998 which greatly helped in bringing the project nearer completion.

A number of other people have helped in various indispensable ways, providing references and suggestions, including in particular Linda Hughes, Yopie Prins, Sharon Bickle and Paula Feldman. Lalla Reeves has, as always, been helpful and supportive, and has also assisted from time to time with parts of the typing work. I would also like to thank the staff of Macquarie University Library, Fisher Library at Sydney University, the British Library, and in particular the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for their always courteous and helpful responses to queries.

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Louisiana State University Press for permission to reproduce extracts from *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition* edited by R. W. Crump.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CURRENT STATUS OF VICTORIAN WOMEN POETS

Victorian poetry has been held until recently to have been largely a male preserve, with exceptions being made, on occasion, for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and possibly Emily Brontë. This view has been consistently reflected in texts set for study in university courses, where Victorian poetry has been most often represented by the Big Four: Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and Hopkins, plus one or two of Hardy, Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites. Over the last five or ten years, however, increasing numbers of women poets have been rediscovered,¹ and it is now being recognised that Victorian readers and critics paid much more attention to the work of these women than was previously thought. Here is an immensely rich new field of study to be explored by today's reader, much of which has not been available in print since it was first published in the nineteenth century. The problem which faces the modern anthologist, therefore, is not one of exclusion so much as of inclusion. We now know that there are so many remarkable women poets of the Victorian era, each of whom is well worthy of study on her own, that the necessary process of selection becomes increasingly difficult.

The most significant anthologies from this new field to have been published so far are those edited respectively by Leighton and Reynolds (1995) and Armstrong and Bristow (1996). Each has aimed at as wide a range as possible. I believe this was the right – and, in a sense, inevitable – choice at the time for these pioneers in the field. Their value resides largely in their ability to be inclusive, to spread out for a new reader as much of the buried treasure brought back from the archives as physically possible within prescribed volume limits. Yet even an anthology which aims to be the most representative in its selections will always encounter the paradox inherent in the notion that selection *can* ever represent fullness. Anthologies, by their very nature, always simultaneously invoke and revoke the idea of a 'full' representation.² This is well understood to be both the limitation and the appeal of an anthology, and it is for this reason that it will always reflect the cultural assumptions of the time of its own making as strongly as those of the time from which it draws material.

¹ The pioneer work of reference in the field was *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women's Writing from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1990), eds V. Blain, P. Clements, I. Grundy. Since its publication, other scholars have followed up its leads and rediscovered a surprising number of forgotten women poets from the Victorian period.

² I am grateful to Dr Yopie Prins for this useful formulation.

THE BASIS OF THE PRESENT SELECTION

The policy of this series is to provide the reader with full annotations for each poem as required. Naturally this cannot be done without some cost in terms of the space available. The question then becomes: how best to allocate that space. The choice I have made here is to offer a representative selection from thirteen poets rather than a much briefer sampling from a larger number. Brief selections are useful in providing a kind of aerial survey of a new terrain; but their drawback is that they skim over the work and flatten out variety. Scholarship in the field has now reached a point from which firmer choices can be made. The thirteen poets included here provide a varied and wide-ranging coverage of the kinds of subjects and poetic treatments most often employed by Victorian women poets, while also giving a close-up view of each individual chosen. I have aimed to include a teachable range of poems for each poet, rather than a choice of my personal favourites, or what I see as the 'best' poems. While it would have been perfectly possible to have made a different selection of poets and still to have fulfilled the general aim of this volume (my original long list contained 64 names), these are the poets who have seemed to me to be among the most likely to be appealing in what they have to offer us today. Of course, there are many others I would like to have been able to include: Anne Evans, for example, with her understated wit and wonderful musical sense; Louisa S. Bevington with her radical political stance; Harriet Hamilton King with her fascination for the Italian struggle for independence; the sharp-minded Bohemian Edith Nesbit (more generally known as a children's writer); the intellectually distinguished and influential Alice Meynell; the remarkable and tormented Charlotte Mew (post-Victorian in her publication, but not in her upbringing); even the immensely popular Jean Ingelow, whose largely sentimental output can yet offer the occasional sharp surprise. In my view it is quite premature to suggest anything like the formation of a new canon: the longer the field remains open to new contenders the more firmly it will continue to establish (rather than entrench) itself. The ongoing struggle for position among champions of different poets is an important part of what brings life to the subject.

I have made a deliberate choice not to include a 'token' working-class poet in the present selection. This may provoke a knee-jerk reaction among the so-called 'politically correct', but my policy is certainly not meant to imply the non-significance of such different voices; rather the opposite. Ellen Johnson ('the factory girl') and Janet Hamilton are the usual choices for working-class 'representation'. Their work is certainly of much interest, yet as Florence Boos and others have shown,³ these two are only the tip of the iceberg. There is a vast treasure trove of these lost voices awaiting rediscovery, often in the dingy pages of regional newspapers, or between the paper covers of cheap pamphlets.⁴ Furthermore, it is important to remember

³ See the ground-breaking work by Julia Swindells (1985) and, more recently, by Florence Boos (1995, 1996, 1998).

⁴ For example, the pamphlet published as *A Bitter Cry from the Ploughfield* by 'E.H.' in 1885 or 1886, who identifies herself further only as 'a ploughman's daughter', contains some extraordinary poems; it has not been possible to discover anything further about their author. See Blain, 1999, pp. 135–63.

that the tradition of working-class women's verse-making belongs primarily within an oral rather than a written culture, and can seem ill-at-ease in its often palpable struggle for literacy when placed cheek-by-jowl with the more self-consciously literary world underwritten by middle-class privilege. In my view, it is almost impossible to avoid patronising writers like Glasgow, Hamilton and others by placing them in a context which fits them so ill. I prefer to let them await their time to appear in the more congenial climate of other working-class voices who faced similar constraints and hardships in their struggle to be heard.

Similarly, I have chosen not to include any of the many and varied 'colonial voices': middle-class Englishwomen who emigrated – often not through their own choice – to live in India, Canada, Australia, and who preserved a special relationship with the mother country while simultaneously offering a unique perspective on the notion of Empire as it manifested itself in the minds of the colonists. Again, these writers seem to me to be crying out for their own anthology which can throw their own particular context into relief.

FELICIA HEMANS AS THE FIRST 'VICTORIAN' POET

Felicia Hemans, a poet quintessentially both English and bourgeois, has been chosen to open this anthology. There will no doubt be literal-minded readers who notice immediately that she is not a Victorian. Strictly speaking, this is true, in that she died in 1835, two years before Victoria succeeded to the throne. Her claim to a place in this anthology comes from her significance as an emblematic Victorian. Her poetry was taken so much to heart by Victorian readers and chimed so closely with their needs and desires that it became part of the Victorian psyche, continuing to command large sales throughout the period. Hemans is a good example, too, of the essential fallacy of periodising literature according to external events, or even according to what might seem to be the prevailing fashion. For although according to traditional chronology she should be classified as a Romantic poet, her verse has little in common with that of Wordsworth (whom she nevertheless revered), Coleridge, Shelley or Keats, and it does her a disservice to look for their concerns and aspirations in her work.⁵

In fact, so identified did she become, over time, with the high Victorian period, that her fame, which remained considerable throughout the nineteenth century, was virtually extinguished with the rapid devaluing of Victorianism by the subsequent generation of modernist writers and critics of the early twentieth century. In a sense, she became a sort of scapegoat for the traits we most strongly repudiate in our ancestors: moral priggishness, prudery, jingoistic patriotism, glorification of war, meek acceptance of women's secondary role in public affairs. When the inevitable reversal of taste occurred and the 'great' Victorians were recuperated from their over-zealous detractors, Hemans was not among them. She was discarded, virtually disowned, although (or perhaps because) she had been so powerful in her influence

⁵ See, for example, Anne K. Mellor (1993), who writes that 'Hemans' poetry locates ultimate human value within the domestic sphere' (p. 124).

on the formation of Victorian tastes. Recent critics have argued, however, that not only does Hemans not deserve such obloquy, but that it is based on too simplistic a reading of her work, which obscures the self-reflexive irony that throws into question previous assumptions about her conservative beliefs.⁶ Her contemporaries regarded her as something of a saint: she had been left to bring up their five children alone by her husband, who had gone to live in Italy 'for the sake of his health' – though really, because the marriage had failed – and she never once complained of him in public, instead choosing to write poem after poem extolling the 'domestic affections'. With hindsight, we can see more clearly just how shrewdly she manipulated the publicity machine of her time, so that no whiff of an indiscretion ever came near her to injure her chance of supporting herself and her family by her writing. In this she was unusually successful, managing to raise and educate her five sons on the proceeds of her poetry.⁷ It should not surprise a modern reader, perhaps, to find that among all her poems praising domestic virtues, very few focus on male virtue; characteristically, it is female courage and power of self-sacrifice, often in the face of male pusillanimity, that receives the accolade. Even in her most famous poem, 'Casabianca', it is the pre-pubescent child who is venerated for his outstanding loyalty to the impossible demand of an absent father in the face of almost certain death.

The poet most often associated with Hemans in critical discussion, Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802–1838), or 'L.E.L.' as she signed herself, is in fact in almost every respect entirely her opposite. Their only true similarity lay in their ability to market themselves to the public: L.E.L. as idealised female victim was adored by a generation of readers. Many of these were young males (the future novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton among them) who happily swallowed the projected image of a mournful poetess who had turned to her lyre for consolation only after her heart had been broken, and who, like the Greek poet Sappho on whom she modelled herself, could look forward only to death to bring her release from the anguish of her abandonment.⁸ Landon rode the coat-tails of Romanticism, manipulating its expressive machinery without believing in it. Yet she, too, like Hemans, needed to support herself (as well as her mother and younger brother) by her writing, and she tapped a rich vein in her contributions to the popular albums and annuals that were *de rigueur* for the middle-class drawing-room table display in the 1820s and 1830s. Had she been less pressed for money, she might have developed into a much more interesting poet, for some of her later work gives evidence of a sharp critical intellect, while her facility for writing verse at speed and under pressure was always remarkable. Her reputation was enhanced by the mystery of her premature death, soon after her marriage to George Maclean, Governor of Cape Coast Castle in West Africa. All kinds of gothic rumours were spread (was it suicide? or even – murder?), and sales of her work multiplied. But in the long run, her brand of poetry – which

⁶ Tricia Lootens (1994) was among the first to problematise simplistic readings of Hemans.

⁷ Paula Feldman (1999) examines Hemans's earnings in some detail.

⁸ For a richly nuanced discussion of the influence of Victorian notions of Sappho on women poets, see Yopie Prins (1999).

characteristically featured heroine-as-victim – had far less influence on the succeeding generation of Victorians than did that of Hemans. If anything, she served as a negative model, a warning: it is interesting that both Rossetti and Barrett Browning were moved to write poems rebuking her narcissism.⁹

THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE WOMAN POET

One theme, however, picked up by both Hemans and Landon, which was to remain of central concern to the poets who followed them, was that of the dilemma of professionalism for the woman poet. Professionalism, not in the modern sense – for many women would have deplored any suggestion that they were more than inspired amateurs¹⁰ – but in the sense of making a serious attempt to reconcile the demands of ambition with the demands of romance, a woman's traditional role in life being to play second fiddle to the male on whom she was generally financially dependent, whether he be husband, father or brother. Placed in the unpleasantly ambiguous personal situation of being separated from her husband, rather than bewail her own distressing circumstance in her verse, Hemans chose instead to deflect it into a series of hints that, for women, the gift of poetic genius was bound to be a source of sorrow rather than joy, as it would inevitably alienate men's affections, thereby standing in the way of any achievement of lasting happiness. The remedy offered, however, is not death but moral courage and religious resignation, thus, in a sense, allowing the poet (or 'poetess' as she was then called) to have her cake and eat it. In other words, she could have her fame, as long as she acknowledged (as Hemans did) that she would assuredly have to pay the price in her life (but not in her poetry). This theme of the peculiar dilemma faced by any female artist in a patriarchal culture who longs both to develop her difference from other women, but also to keep her commonality with them, by achieving fulfilment through romantic love, has a number of variations, and it can be traced in one form or other through the work of many of the poets in this volume.¹¹

Those poets who come to terms more readily with this problem are those who appear to be less oriented (in their poetry, at any rate) towards the fulfilment of heterosexual desires: Webster, Blind, Naden, Levy, Coleridge, Kendall and Field. The prime example here, of course, is Michael Field, the pen-name adopted by two women poets who actually lived together as lovers, and who jointly produced a large number of volumes. These were Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt and niece, who vowed early to dedicate themselves to poetry and to each other (see their poem titled 'Prologue') and who were enabled to do so for the rest of

⁹ EBB's poem 'L.E.L.'s Last Question' (1844) quotes from one of Landon's last poems as epigraph: 'Do you think of me as I think of you?', while Rossetti's poem, titled simply 'L.E.L.' (1866), in turn quotes from EBB's poem as its epigraph: 'Whose heart was breaking for a little love'.

¹⁰ See, for example, my discussion of the link between notions of amateurism and those of ladylike (or gentlemanly) behaviour (Blain, 1998).

¹¹ For a full discussion of these and related issues, see Dorothy Mermin (1993).