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*Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* by Linda H. Peterson (review)

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(Review)

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enjoy a “banquet in the wilderness” influenced by the Song of Songs, as evidenced by a late Song-saturated poem by Plymouth Colony’s most famous governor and author, William Bradford (96). Perhaps these separating Puritans who came to be at home in their environment offer a more sustainable model for us than those bent on promoting their American experiment as a transcendent city upon a hill.

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***Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market.*** By Linda H. Peterson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-691-14017-9. Pp xv + 289. \$35.00.

After perusing an encyclopedia of Victorian women authors, a very smart colleague was struck by her conclusions, and asked me with genuine curiosity if I had ever noticed how many nineteenth-century women writers were “clergymen’s daughters.” I suppose she thought that my status as both Victorianist and Presbyterian might have rendered me especially attuned to this connection. The truth is, with any interest in the intersections of faith and literature, one would have a difficult time missing the frequent overlap in these two Victorian circles. While the Brontës offer the most striking example, a plethora of other women suggest a correlation between growing up in a parsonage and becoming a woman writer in nineteenth-century England, but the connection has not garnered significant scholarly attention. This statistical correspondence is *not* one of the facts of the Victorian market that Linda Peterson explores in *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, nor does she directly consider any myths about the inspirational effects of an early life in church for writing women. Peterson often tends to the faith identities of her subjects, but her solid, engaging book might have been more groundbreaking if she had given those faith commitments a more central place. Her careful attention to the differing conditions of the Victorian literary marketplace and to the multitudinous ways that individual women writers operated within those conditions makes *Becoming a Woman of Letters* a valuable resource for anyone interested in the history of authorship, the development of the idea of the woman writer, or Victorian print culture, and the book makes unique contributions to the history of women and the church.

Peterson devotes considerable attention to the ecclesiastical identifications and spiritual commitments of her six main subjects: Harriet Martineau, Mary Howitt, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Riddell, Alice Meynell, and Mary Cholmondeley. Religion plays perhaps its most central role when she considers Mary Howitt’s Quakerism and the collaborative domestic model it encouraged in working with her

husband William (also a Quaker). Peterson then analyzes how Mary's conversion to Catholicism created a breach in imaginative sensibilities that led to the end of another collaborative relationship—with her adult daughter, Anna Mary Howitt Watts. When Anna Mary converted to spiritualism with her husband, she developed differing understandings of the feminine authorial project, even though Mary had nurtured Anna Mary's authorial and artistic vision from her childhood. Mary and Anna Mary Howitt's spiritual allegiances shifted more than the other women Peterson considers, but conversion of some kind occurs regularly in the life stories of Victorian women writers—most famously with George Eliot's conversion out of evangelicalism and eventually into Comtean humanism. The frequency of religious conversion itself seems worth exploring in these cases. Peterson's arguments repeatedly demonstrate the value of understanding the wide and diverse terrain of Victorian Christianity to glean insight into authorial perceptions of a life of the mind or of a public voice. Through the winding journey of the Howitts' religious and professional lives, Peterson refuses to accept the false binary between spiritual and professional life; she takes seriously the impacts of the Howitts' subtly shifting religious beliefs about vocational responsibilities and gives weight to how those beliefs work in tandem with economic concerns to shape their professional paths and decisions. The Howitts, in Peterson's analysis, are never simply "Christian," but more precisely Quaker, then Catholic and spiritualist. Peterson's doctrinal sensitivity matches her economic acumen, and her arguments often reveal the payoff of that intricate weaving of material and ideal influences in shaping authorial choices and attitudes, to affirm claims such as the one that opens her discussion of the elder Howitt: "the case of Mary Howitt is more complex than that of a woman poet in an age of prose" (97). Even with her careful attention to many forces contributing to the literary fields of her subjects, Peterson might have considered more fully the connections between faith commitments and different doctrinal understandings of "vocation" that seem to motivate each of the six women she focuses on. Take, for instance, the Howitts. Peterson begins promisingly by considering, in part, how William and Mary's shared commitments to Quaker practice and social justice prompted their decision to collaborate on early literary journals—*Howitt's Journal* and *People's Journal*—that would combine Mary's poetic calling with other literary essays and explorations of class inequalities and workers' rights. Her analysis is less clear, however, on how Quakerism played into Mary's staunch commitment to a "family collaboration" model of authorship. She is even less clear on why, after her conversion, Mary's Catholicism prompted her final efforts to rebuild her mother-daughter collaboration with Anna Mary by bringing her daughter to the continent to complete illustrations of the family home for Mary's *Autobiography*. Clearly Quaker understandings of equality and Catholic doctrines of forgiveness and atonement might have played into these formative authorial decisions. Peterson's assertions about faith commitments and professionalism continually ring true, but had she turned her highly adept research skills toward these questions, even briefly,

she might have added depth to her insights about Victorian women's notions of professional authorship. Enough here of the book one wishes Linda Peterson had written. The one she produced offers plenty to appreciate.

Peterson attains her ability to dwell in complexity, in part, by maintaining a "case study" organization. The peculiarities of each of her six chosen writers' careers are not forced into relevance in her analysis of the career of any other. So, for instance, even though both Mary Howitt and Alice Meynell were poets who also participated in collaborative journal publishing with their husbands, and even though both converted to Catholicism, Peterson avoids easy links that would discount the deep differences between Howitt's First-Reform Bill era literary field and Meynell's aesthetic era of *The Yellow Book* after the Oxford Movement. Peterson also persistently avoids the problematic opposition between "profession" (a word she often invokes) and "vocation" (a term she uses, though more rarely). This troublesome opposition between a term denoting status and another indicating religious calling is most deflating in studies of nineteenth-century women, where the material and religious realms join in a myriad of combinations. She continually scrutinizes the ineffectiveness of the false binary of economic and critical success, with frequent references to Pierre Bourdieu's two "literary subfields": financial and artistic production. The problem with analyzing the authorial lives of Victorian women (or perhaps any authors, or any women) may not be so much a "false binary," as the falseness of *any* binary—that is, any conceptual form that considers only two relevant positions in play at once. As Peterson consistently demonstrates, multiple material and ideal forces shaped how Martineau, Howitt, Gaskell, Riddle, Meynell, and Cholmondeley imagined and practiced authorship.

Peterson incisively accounts for the fluctuations in the literary marketplace over the long Victorian period, beginning with a chapter devoted to Harriet Martineau and one to the Howitts in the 1820s and 1830s that concentrates on periodical publishing and the diminished power of poetry in post-Romantic decades. Her studies move through to Alice Meynell and Mary Cholmondeley at the *fin de siècle*, with a generous pause at midcentury to consider the careers of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Riddell as female novelists and public voices on women authors. While focusing on these six different women—essayists, poets, novelists, biographers, autobiographers, journalists and editors—Peterson readily connects her main subjects and other nineteenth-century female literary forces, including Felicia Hemans, Anna Jameson, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. Furthermore, Peterson takes in the larger literary field, ever attentive to her subjects' interactions with male colleagues, editors, contributors and collaborators in England, and when relevant, in the United States and on the continent. A preliminary chapter focuses on *Fraser's Magazine* to establish how early nineteenth-century readers and publishers imagined authors, and how the periodical press built or impeded authorial lives. Peterson varies her interest in the field of periodical publishing, or in the place of serialization or three-decker novels or poetry and poetic criticism,

depending on the professional choices made by the woman she focuses on in any given chapter. Throughout, her keen awareness of the full range of professional opportunities in Victorian print culture support her final comment: "Although this study of the Victorian woman of letters disclaims any large historical arc of rise and fall, it does finally reveal that the rise or fall of any individual woman author was dependent on the literary field in which she produced her work" (223).

The value of *Becoming a Woman of Letters* lies in its richly researched studies of these six individual women authors, and their place (or places) in their different literary fields. Peterson's generous incorporation of her findings from archival research gives particular value to her studies of Meynell, Martineau, Cholmondeley and the Howitts. She connects self-perceptions of these women in their letters with publishers' archives, arguments from their own reviews and reviews of other Victorians on writing women, as well as from their novels and poetry when appropriate, to develop rich analyses of variations on women's paths to, or away from, professional success. Peterson grounds her analyses in the critics who broke ground in Anglo-American feminist literary studies, inviting questions of feminine community and voice into dialogue with more recent New Historicists and material culture scholars. Furthermore, she draws originally on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially *Field of Cultural Production* (1993), to frame each of her studies, taking his understanding of the literary field as "a site of struggles." Peterson elucidates the particularities of those struggles for each of her intriguing subjects.

*Becoming a Woman of Letters* would have benefitted from more assertive editing; at points it reads like the collection of previously circulated work that it is, and there are a few surprising errors in detail. Alternately, Peterson's prose is often incisive, compact, and elegant. Her generous yet deftly chosen illustrations amplify her arguments and deepen the literary and historical richness of this insightful study of Victorian women and authorship.

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***Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life.*** Edited by Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009. ISBN 978-0-8131-2555-8. Pp. vi + 266. \$40.00

In the introduction to Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens' engaging book, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, Shuman writes: "This is not a book about Wendell Berry. It is not a biography, nor does it attempt a systematic critical analysis of his writing ... Rather, these essays are intended to be contributions to an ongoing conversation ... among a particular group of persons, over time and in a