

Female models

EMILY HODGSON ANDERSON

Caroline Franklin

THE FEMALE ROMANTICS
Nineteenth-century women novelists and Byronism
270pp. Routledge. £85.
978 0 415 99541 2

Brenda R. Weber

WOMEN AND LITERARY
CELEBRITY IN THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY
The transatlantic production of fame and gender
280pp. Ashgate. £60.
978 1 4094 0073 8

March 1812 was the month that not only made Byron famous – overnight, by his own account – but, in so doing, created a new cult of literary genius. The Byronic genius it celebrated was seductive, intelligent, melancholy and isolated from society. He was also a “he”. It was thanks to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and all that followed, that “Byromania” swept Europe in the nineteenth century; there were to be complicated consequences for women writers.

This much is clear from *The Female Romantics* by Caroline Franklin, which looks at how Byron became the focus of a struggle between libertinism and feminism, and Brenda R. Weber’s *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century*, which looks more generally at how women writers depicted literary celebrity in their own writings, in order to make that cultural category an equally feminine preserve. Both books provide valuable insight into overlooked influences on nineteenth-century women’s writing, and the literary manoeuvres that these influences produce.

The proto-feminist impulses of interest to both Franklin and Weber have Protestant foundations. Generations of female believers, from Mary Astell to Mary Hays, had found in religion a means of self-assertion. “The Bible is for, and not against us”, Astell claimed in 1700, underlining a Puritan belief in the democracy of God’s grace. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Byron had helped produce a version of Romantic individualism in which, according to Franklin, “sexual freedom [was] the ultimate expression of selfhood and defiance of moral law”. But this was not freedom for all. Mary Wollstonecraft’s unorthodox lifestyle, as publicized by William Godwin in his biography, would destroy her reputation for almost a century; and the double standard is compellingly exemplified by the scandal surrounding Lady Byron’s separation from her husband. By 1816, Byron had had numerous, well-publicized affairs, yet he was incredulous when she left him, and at her even more shocking refusal to return. Faced with this fact, he turned to verse:

Fare thee well! And if for ever
Still for ever, fare thee well:
Even though unforgetting, never
’Gainst thee shall my heart rebel.
Would that breast were bared before thee
Where thy head so oft hath lain,
While that placid sleep came o’er thee
Which thou ne’er canst know again . . .

The lines exude a Byronic sexuality to which Annabella Byron seems now immune: from her, Byron received no reply. But when circulated among the *bon ton*, the verses prompted among its female readers an immediate if contradictory set of responses. In literary rejoinders, written as though by Lady Byron or incorporated directly into novels, the maltreated wife was cast as an angel praying for Byron’s redemption – a role model for single women, or a martyr to libertinism. The novelists Caroline Norton and Rosina Bulwer Lytton used the backdrop of the separation scandal to dis-

tion resonates with cultural assumptions about women’s achievements: that their fame/celebrity must come passively, rather than be actively pursued.

For Weber, Charlotte Brontë emblemizes what it meant to be a famous woman in the Victorian period. Hers is a fame bred not merely from her successful publications or the mystery incited by her pseudonym, but from the posthumous reconstruction of her persona in Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) shows Gaskell working to offset the textual “body” of Charlotte (strong and robust) with the extensively described physical body (delicate and frail). Gaskell’s goal is to navigate the conflicting expectations of literary ambition, for Brontë’s sake but also for her own. Suffering from public censure for her recent novels, Gaskell seeks to redeem herself by redeeming another: her Brontë, invested with ambitious genius, emerges as subject to the whims of her imagination and the limitations of her feminine, failing body. But Gaskell, too, by using meek words to reconstruct a “coarse” author, emerges as a literary woman fit to join the halls of fame. “No other living author could have done so well”, applauds the *New York Daily Times* reviewer, of Gaskell’s *Life*. “The manner in which it has been executed entitles her to the gratitude of the literary world.”

The other writers featured in Weber’s study ring the changes on the same theme. The prolific novelist Margaret Oliphant, whom Virginia Woolf would accuse of “selling her brain”, regularly announced her own inferiority as a writer and thus “fought against her own erasure by writing about it”. The African American writers Elizabeth Keckley (dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln, the First Lady) and Eliza Potter (hairdresser to the elites) advertise their subordinate status, even as they reveal themselves to be stage managers in the acts of artifice that construct a white ideal. Mary Cholmondeley, Rhoda Broughton and Elizabeth Robins put the character of the woman author into their novels: an authoress in Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage* (1899) is met by another character who has baked a potato in the dying embers of her manuscript (an impractical enough vignette – for anyone who has ever baked a potato – to suggest Cholmondeley’s own literary endeavours have taken her away from the kitchen). Other writer-characters may be seen as monstrous when they put their textual “children” before their biological ones. These gestures, Weber asserts, show the women writer working to redefine womanhood in a manner that gives the author power of definition.

Literary celebrity in nineteenth-century Britain was a male game, and Weber’s point throughout her study is that famous woman writers played this game in order to change it. The risk of this strategy, however, is one made especially evident in Franklin’s book. Both books provide nuanced accounts of how women writers resisted masculine models of influence, but they also demonstrate the danger of being seduced by the very paradigm, or paragon, you set out to reform.

In an age when literary ambition itself was perceived to be masculine, Stowe could only attract criticism for writing this book. One satirical print has her climbing up a marble statue of Byron, her foot firmly in his groin. Stowe, the print suggests, has encroached on male territory: she is merely using Byron’s literary reputation to advance her own.

Byron is not as prominent a touchstone in Weber’s study as he is in Franklin’s, but the same tensions shape her account of the nineteenth-century woman writer’s attitudes to fame. Weber uses “fame” and “celebrity” as interchangeable, in a purposeful conflation that is meant to challenge the gender bias typically associated with each term: fame indicating lauded ambition and the masculine purviews of heroism and war; celebrity signifying scandal-stained ambition and the “feminized domains of rumor and innuendo”. For nineteenth-century women, no less than for Byron himself, this distinction was porous. Byron’s purported astonishment at his sudden literary reputa-

te.
at wa.
brief histo.
on rat.
of Britain, u.
Swinging London. (C.
in the author
and her publisher here is
taken by several
slips, including the abdication in 1936 of
“Edward VII”, the presence of “African
communities” in “Bayswater” in the 1950s,
and the fashions of Mary Quant and “Ossie
Davis”).

David describes an unstable post-war world, a hostile environment in which Manning’s constant complaints about publishers’ advances and lack of solo reviews are understandable. The book’s detailed social history allows the modern reader to appreciate the courage Manning needed to escape from provincial nonentity, and to place her as a writer who, like Lara Feigel’s five subjects, turned to writing about war as an alternative to dreary class-bound fiction. But the background material often overwhelms the central portrait, in spite of David’s presentation of Manning as a sort of heroine, a woman who was “always impeccably well-groomed”, who had a “slim figure” and a “beautiful complexion” – she gives us her weight in 1946 (eighty-four pounds) and tells us that “All her life Olivia loved beautiful things”.

In contrast to the biographical model, Eve Patten’s reappraisal examines the work through modern literary-critical paradigms, and *Imperial Refugee* employs some original manoeuvres as part of its aim to relocate Manning within a broader international movement. Patten persuasively reads *The Balkan Trilogy* as an examination of the British Empire, a “rumbling critique of British naivety and ego”, “an extended post-war narrative of reproach” and “a response to the Cold War”. She also makes a case for an Irish inflexion, citing Gothic elements in Manning’s evocations of Romania where her descriptions of refugees are seen as influenced by Bram Stoker and Sheridan Le Fanu. Manning’s mother came from Belfast and her daughter used to boast of her “Anglo-Irish” ancestry. For Patten, the Belfast inheritance lies behind the novels’ themes of displacement and their portrayal of divided “allegiances”, both personal and political. More generally, Manning is seen as an outsider, a prophet of “anti-Englishness”, a proto-feminist whose autobiographical character Harriet Pringle was a way of freeing herself from the male-dominated world; a writer who stood against English rivals, whether the Angry Young Men of the 1950s or the domestic chronicles of Elizabeth Taylor. Patten’s book, like David’s, is full of literary coteries. She lists the half-forgotten representatives of “Intermodernism”: Robert Liddell, Freya Stark, Phyllis Bottome, Jocelyn Brooke, Storm Jameson, Inez Holden, Kay Dick. She also provides some illuminating textual analysis. Her argument that in Manning’s work the female body becomes “a metaphoric site for political statement” is convincingly put, and her ideas about war as a “masculine space” are productive, as is her noting of Manning’s balance between the journalistic and the poetic. Both David and Patten evoke the milieu in which works were created, but Manning herself remains out of sight, her inner life hidden by the surface facts.