

INTRODUCTION

NARRATIVES OF VICTORIAN ANTIFEMINISM

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“Women themselves are chiefly to blame for the strange and humiliating notion that they are a sect, a party, an oppressed nationality as it were, and not an integral part of the race” (174), wrote Margaret Oliphant in a review of “New Books” in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in August 1870. Pinpointing some of the most damaging—“humiliating”—manifestations of any such discrimination as “pseudo-philosophies” (174), Oliphant proceeded to assert that it was surely counterproductive to any suggestion of equality—and women’s equal treatment as writers—to engender additional categories of discrimination against the works of female authors by conceptualising them as intrinsically different, as the writing of a species set apart from humanity. Surely, Oliphant maintained, humanity ought to be considered as more encompassing: “By common consent, Humanity has been considered a greater thing than Sex since ever the race has been a race” (174). Any deliberate division

(and consequent discrimination) might well have a detrimental impact on the writing as well as the reception of literature. Oliphant's at-times virulently critical accounts of popular writing and its reception highlight the centrality of debates on its quality in Victorian literary culture, testifying to the multiplicity of markedly self-reflexive reactions and, furthermore, to the creative impact of the variously contending counter-discourses. Their significance for the development of popular fiction in the nineteenth century, however, has so far largely been pushed aside—or gingerly sidestepped—in discussions of Victorian antifeminism. It has been overshadowed by often ideologically skewed readings.

Beyond a critique of the dangers of delimiting binary constructions, with all the typecasting they necessarily entailed (and some of the most persistent clichés still prevail), Oliphant, it is crucial to note, specifically articulated the limits such dichotomous concepts could impose on narrative itself.¹ Bad enough that “this curious sexual theory” (174) threatened to erase all complexities of human relationships, to marginalise the “spiritual resemblance” or “affinity” between “brother and sister, between parent and child of opposite sexes” (174). In concentrating almost exclusively either on romance and marriage or, conversely, on domesticity's literal or metaphorical confinement of desire, especially sentimental and sensational fiction was seen to press both moral concerns and narrative arcs into the same circularity revolving on “wild notions about marriage [and] the ‘Sex Problem’” (49), as Oliphant was to put it in her contribution to the 1897 *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign: A Book of Appreciations*. And the problem did not stop there. Female writers increasingly struggled with fears of being expected to produce what George Eliot termed “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” in her often cited, eponymous article of 1856. In 1849 Charlotte Brontë similarly anticipated the need to admonish editors and reviewers not to typecast her work: “To you I am neither man nor woman—I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me—the sole ground on which I accept your judgement” (Letter 364 2: 64). In her seminal study of nineteenth-century women's writing, Elaine Showalter refers

to the Brontës' "radical innocence" as they "confronted all sexually biased criticism head-on" (96), a radicalism that in itself promises to complicate any then emerging binaries. These binaries formed part of the inherited sets of labels that, as Nicola Diane Thompson likewise warned a decade ago, "distort the complexity of the historically specific discourses and contexts in which the novels are embedded" (4). It is therefore vital to reconsider the self-reflexive counterreactions to such stereotyping that can be found in these texts themselves.

By the 1870s, sexually biased criticism had become a complex as well as pressing issue, one that, as Oliphant stressed, was receiving additional boosts from unexpected sources. Attendant controversies entered women's writing on every level. In Charlotte Yonge's 1873 multivolume domestic chronicle *The Pillars of the House*, for example, the lame artist Cherry Underwood achieves the height of her success when her well-received pictures are taken for the work of a (professional) male painter. It is perceived as a testimony to her talent that critics at an exhibition "should not have thought [her painting] a woman's work": "This, the most ambitioned praise a woman can receive, made her indeed Cherry-red" (2: 137). Yet if Cherry's work explodes the notoriously gendered associations of High Art with predominantly male professionalism and popular art with femininity and amateur work in Victorian culture, her own appreciation of the attendant praise unquestionably acknowledges a gendered terminology of superiority. On an additional level, moreover, her paintings remain concentrated on the domestic. With yet another twist, this is precisely why they are more successful and, it is suggested, at least morally superior to her brother's. By metaphorical projection, this expresses Yonge's own ethos as an emphatically domestic writer. Such increasingly self-reflexive passages concerning the value of domestic narrative indeed achieved particular poignancy when issues of canonisation began to dominate critical debates on popular fiction from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Landmark essays such as Eliza Lynn Linton's "The Girl of the Period" (1868) as well as Oliphant's reviews or Yonge's editorial work on *The Monthly Packet*, from its establishment in 1851 until her removal as editor in 1893, evince the

urgency, pervasiveness, and most importantly, the wide range of what were later summed up as antifeminist engagements with a rapidly changing literary as well as cultural environment.

What denotes Oliphant's comments as a particularly revealing point of access to narratives of Victorian antifeminism, in fact, is that the main target is Linton's *Ourselves: A Series of Essays on Women* (1869). Its very title comes under attack as Oliphant undermines one of its central premises with pointed irony: "If any man were to write a book called 'Ourselves,' and intended to point out the special vices and weaknesses of his 'brothers,' with what a storm of amazed derision would the publication be received" (174). Linton, like Oliphant, has long and repeatedly been labelled an antifeminist Victorian woman writer. Both have become equally notorious for their attacks on protofeminist agendas of the time. Their nonfictional writing shows them critical (and often severely so) of changing approaches to womanhood, femininity, and specifically modern women, while their often intensely controversial treatment of prevalent discourses marks them out as active participants in the public sphere. In posing contrasting approaches to women's representation against each other, Oliphant's comments on Linton bring to the fore the various intricacies and incongruities in the shifting conceptualisations of both feminism and antifeminism.

Victorian antifeminism as a conceptual creation prompts us to rethink the complexities of the initial reception and further critical discussion of writing by women. In her groundbreaking study of domestic women writers, Valerie Sanders stresses that we need to draw the formation of such categories, including the terminology of *antifeminism* and its interrelation with feminism, into question, reminding us that the "definition of antifeminism naturally hinges on how we perceive feminism" (*Eve's* 3). Both constitute retrospectively coined terms with changing connotations. Highlighting the often-neglected "wide grey area between feminism and antifeminism, where women who are indifferent to the whole controversy would place themselves ideologically" (*Eve's* 5), Sanders thus importantly extends the meaning of the term beyond the *OED's* definition of an antifeminist as a person hostile to specific items in women's

rights campaigns.² Most of the novelists labelled—or branded—as typical antifeminists held ambiguous, even contending, views on various, not necessarily interrelated, agendas. They may be generally characterised by a shared interest in the domestic, by being opposed to certain ideological doctrines (including the attendant stereotyping of women authors and their thereby gendered works), or simply by not being interested in political constructions. Terms such as *domestic* and *popular*, however, are even more difficult to theorise, and are moreover associated the more emphatically perhaps with aesthetic quality judgements. As Brenda Ayres has recently pointed out, “Such signifiers as ‘domestic, sentimental, and sensational’ persist with implication that these novels have value but little literary virtue; they might become canonised and yet remain stigmatised as those silly novels by silly women novelists” (xiv).

By contrast, antisuffragism (with which antifeminism overlaps in some parts) can be more clearly demarcated, although Julia Bush has argued that a strict dichotomy between suffragettes and “antis” likewise leaves out the silent majority, and that this “non-political women’s movement” can provide important insight precisely because of its continued marginalisation (4). Although primarily focused on the political dimension of antisuffragism, Bush’s recent study not only suggests that novels by writers opposed to the vote (Bush mentions Linton and Yonge, among others) contain interesting evidence of “varied and fluctuating viewpoints on many aspects of the Woman Question” (84). It is also suggestive, Bush further emphasises, that “some of the most widely read Victorian novelists, and some of those whose reputations have declined most steeply since the turn of the century, were committed anti-suffragists” (4). Building on Bush’s study, Susan Hamilton, in her contribution to this collection, marks out fissures in women’s writing on antifeminism in general and the suffrage in particular by dissecting Linton’s creation of a distinctive press signature. As her professional achievements as a novelist and journalist generated the value of her signature, Linton was in many ways an uneasy presence on the anti-suffrage petition. So far, however, the predominantly dismissive treatment of “antis” in critical assessments of women’s contributions to

the public sphere and to literature has largely erased the significance of just such perceived incongruities. Showalter already acknowledges that “[e]ven the good grey Charlotte Yonge has a fiercer side” (137), yet such ambiguities fall foul of neat categories. As a result, they have been chiefly ignored in ideologically driven appraisals that wish to create the nineteenth-century woman author as an inherently subversive, subaltern, protofeminist figure.

Traditional feminist “recovery work” has been crucial in unearthing numerous, once intensely popular, and subsequently largely forgotten works, yet women writers not directly invested in—even averse to—specific agendas have thus additionally been marginalised for disproving an evolutionary model of progressive female self-representation. Such ongoing recuperative projects consequently suffer from what Talia Schaffer has recently termed their “partisan advocacy” (325). Ann Cvetkovich, back in 1992, was among the first to point out that “there has been a tendency [...] to assume that noncanonical texts must be proven subversive to be studied,” and that “feminist critics have also been too willing to celebrate popular culture as a voice for female subjectivity” (38–39). The restrictions imposed upon their choice of targets have ironically short-circuited the initial impetus to move “beyond the handful of acceptable women writers to look at all the minor and forgotten figures whose careers and books had shaped a tradition” (xxi), as Showalter was to put it a decade ago in her introduction to the expanded edition of her reprinted 1977 *A Literature of Their Own*. The parameters of the “acceptable” might have changed repeatedly, but the construction of a literary canon is not, as Showalter perceptively points out, “a conspiracy, but a process determined by a large cultural network” (xxv). As such, it always carries the danger that it loses “sight of the minor novelists, who were the links in the chain” (Showalter 7). Novelists who “publicly proclaimed, and sincerely believed, their antifeminism” nonetheless displayed a “genuine transcendence of female identity” by following their vocation as writers (Showalter 21).

Literary critics have now been able, by looking closely at the individual texts, to explore these antifeminist writers’ careful negotiation

of art, work, the domestic, and the public, including the pressures generated by the mass market. This shift has importantly been propelled by a growing recognition that popular texts produced for mass consumption cannot therefore automatically be presumed to be “simply formulaic and non-thought-provoking” (Liggins and Duffy xiii). Rather, “markets could both limit and liberate popular writers, who were able to manipulate generic conventions in order to allow readers to interpret texts oppositionally” (Liggins and Duffy xx). More recently, a return to close analysis of individual texts has revealed that “domesticity could be empowering for women who sought to enter the professional workplace” (Zakreski 6) and that domestic women writers regularly posited a successful integration of competing demands. In this, domestic fiction stands in pointed contrast to New Woman novels, for example, that have traditionally been associated with feminist movements but which “habitually represent the female artist as succumbing to physical and/or mental breakdown” (Pykett 148).³ This essential revaluation of the careful balancing acts proposed by antifeminist writers has emerged alongside similar reconsiderations of once so pointedly unfashionable values as self-sacrifice, networks of dependence, or the idealisation of domestic units or close familial and pseudofamilial relationships ungrounded in (suppressed) sexual desire.

Until this recent turn, however, writers primarily of domestic fiction, such as Linton, Oliphant, or Yonge, were considered the bogeywomen of nineteenth-century protofeminism—if they received any mention at all. Conversely, the likewise all too easy alignment of sensation fiction with the transgressive or subversive has further contributed to simplifying binary constructions that still threaten to delimit our appreciation of the sheer variety of Victorian popular fiction. Far from playing into established categories of antifeminism versus protofeminism, the present study therefore seeks to break through just such constructions. The revival of interest in the Victorian sensation novel as a once nearly forgotten subgenre, Pamela K. Gilbert significantly stresses in the opening chapter, was after all chiefly instigated by feminist critics, and hence it is hardly surprising that they concentrated on the genre’s transgressiveness.

This was often at the expense of more ambiguous, or self-consciously antisensational, writers on the one hand and of sensational writers who skirted subversive elements on the other. Not only did some of the most sensational writers ultimately reinforce domestic ideals by illuminating their significance through their absence; committed domestic, even didactic, novelists traded on the most successful sensational formulae. They did so partly to tap into a popular market but also to adapt such paradigms for different agendas, undercutting any easy identification of a specific genre with a specific ideology or doctrine. To complicate matters—and thereby enable us to look beyond fixed categories—the most prolific and popular writers of the time not only changed track more than once in adopting emerging subgenres and reacting to each other's writing. They also transcended various lines of demarcation in order to capitalise on ambiguities, on ruptures of established plotlines that thereby create narrative tension.

As the individual chapters in this collection show, Oliphant and Yonge both drew, in a distinctly different fashion, on the narrative potential of literary sensationalism, whereas such a frequently typified sensation novelist as Mary Elizabeth Braddon displayed considerable ambiguity in her representation of the *femme fatale*, for example. Most importantly, as Gilbert stresses in her contribution to this collection, it is vital to acknowledge that there is virtue to reading Victorian literature that is not in direct relation to feminism and that this should not be the sole justification for reading women's writing. Taking the versatile *oeuvre* of Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée) as a case study, Gilbert's discussion of "Feminism and the Canon: Recovery and Reconsideration of Popular Novelists" leads us through the last decades of "recovery work" to critique some of its impasses. Not only was the litmus test with which "forgotten" authors were first approached not very sensitive to begin with, but if this indisputably restricted early recovery tactics, Gilbert also reminds us how much more damaging the subsequent "theoretical turn" proved to be in bringing this unearthing to a temporary halt. Referencing Carol Poster's 1996 article "Oxidation Is a Feminist Issue," which deplored that "while we theorise, unrecovered Victorian women's

writings, printed on acid paper, crumble into permanent and irretrievable oblivion” (289), Gilbert emphasises that a renewed, more open-minded, recuperative work remains the best way to show that Victorian authors are vastly different, versatile, complicated, and often self-contradictory: in short, that they refuse to be sorted into neat little categories.

In the second chapter, “Marketing Antifeminism: Eliza Lynn Linton’s ‘Wild Women’ Series and the Possibilities of Periodical Signature,” Susan Hamilton then addresses a significant issue in the shifting epistemologies of antifeminism by analysing Linton’s writing as dynamic and openly scandalous as it weaved in and out of the emerging antisuffrage movement. A close analysis of Linton’s “Wild Women” articles in the journal *Nineteenth Century*, read side by side with Mona Caird’s “A Defence of the So-Called Wild Women” (1892), published a year after the appearance of the first in Linton’s series, helps trace the ways in which antifeminism was marketed and began to form a particular kind of press writing with distinct strategies and formal properties. In this, the chapter also forms a companion piece to Kristine Moruzi’s “‘The Inferiority of Women’: Complicating Charlotte Yonge’s Perception of Girlhood in *The Monthly Packet*.” Moruzi newly explores Yonge’s editorial work on *The Monthly Packet* beyond her series of articles on the subject of “Womankind,” which have—like Linton’s “Girl of the Period”—been regularly cited out of context. Reading the “editorial content” of Yonge’s magazine alongside the fictional works that were simultaneously serialised within its pages, Moruzi shows that decades of editorial work and a prolific output of fiction reveal Yonge’s perspective towards her girl readers—her main target group—to be intensely complex and oftentimes contradictory, albeit always sensitive to changing needs and expectations. At the same time, Yonge’s endeavour to respond to the challenges posed by Linton’s scandalous articles evinces the impossibility to pin down Victorian antifeminism as a particular set of attitudes or concepts.

As we move from Moruzi’s exploration of Yonge’s editorial writing and her fiction side by side to close readings, first, of Yonge’s most popular, not to say notorious, novels and, then, of Oliphant’s partly parodic experiments in genre, the following chapters are grouped together to reassess

authors and works most commonly dismissed as antifeminist, domestic, and popular. Within this grouping, the first three essays provide a spectrum of different approaches to Yonge's fiction. Lynn Shakinovsky's "Domestic History and the Idea of the Nation in Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*" suggests a new reading of Yonge's first success, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), the novel famous for being the popular choice of young officers in hospital in 1855 during the Crimean War (Hayter 1), and which E. A. Bennett, in *Fame and Fiction: An Enquiry into Certain Popularities* (1901), was to term Yonge's "sign-manual upon an epoch" (49). Shakinovsky argues that while the novel functions on one level as an endorsement of a High Church Christianity located inside the home, it is, paradoxically, the ruptures located within the family that crucially complicate the notion of the home as a central site of morality and spirituality. As a result, the novel affords a subtle moral, or psychological, analysis of history and domesticity that is rich with ambiguity and contradiction.

Talia Schaffer's discussion of *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) similarly locates central ambiguities in Yonge's representation of the Victorian family but further suggests that, far from being a contradiction within the text, this forms the premise of an alternative construction of marital relations. "Maiden Pairs: The Sororal Romance in *The Clever Woman of the Family*" argues that Yonge creates an alternative space in which union means a shared understanding that is consistently depicted as familial, fraternal, or sororal, rather than as stemming from erotic desire. Same-sex pairs populate the novel as the fundament of interconnected relationships, relationships that marriage reassembles, rather than disrupts. The ideal union therein means an additional link in an extended familial network. The significance of this alternative construction, Schaffer argues, asks us to rethink our understanding of Victorian familial dynamics.

The intricate levels of Yonge's disruption of gendered constructions within outwardly well-ordered domestic confines are similarly explored in Elizabeth C. Juckett's "Cross-Gendering the Underwoods: Christian Subjection in Charlotte Yonge's *The Pillars of the House*." Building on

the warning that we need to consider “masculine and feminine identities not as distinct and separate constructs,” influentially articulated in masculinity studies (Roper and Tosh 8), Valerie Sanders has already stressed that “the family is the ideal place in which to site such an investigation, and [that] the brother-sister relationship is as central to the debate as the relations between parents and children” (*Brother-Sister* 9). In Yonge’s novels, Sanders suggests, families regularly “split off into brother-sister pairs who function like couples within the enormous sibling structure” (*Brother-Sister* 97), yet as Schaffer and Juckett both show, the construction of ideal, reconstituted families often operates along extensions of such structures that are intriguingly multifaceted and consciously explode gender norms. In analysing in detail the narrative function of the traditional value of subjection as demanding the feminisation of every Christian subject, female or male, and how the endorsement of this value is emphatically different from mere female confinement or submissiveness (which have tragic consequences in the novel), Juckett’s essay moreover links together Schaffer’s focus on Yonge’s alternative family constructions and Shakinovsky’s reassessment of the complex realisation of a Tractarian agenda.

In focusing on the much misunderstood value of self-sacrifice, Tamara S. Wagner’s “Marriage Plots and ‘Matters of More Importance’: Sensationalising Self-Sacrifice in Victorian Domestic Fiction” then forms a transitional piece both in its combination of genre analysis with a revaluation of ideals that have regularly been dismissed as typically antifeminist and in its juxtaposition of fiction by Yonge and Oliphant. Comparing the different engagement with the narrative potential of an increasingly sensationalised representation of self-sacrifice, or altruism, in novels of the midsixties, Wagner shows how the reworking of expected plotlines in Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) and Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) cuts across the artificial dividing lines of experimental and traditional, radical and conservative, domestic and sensational, women writers. Antifeminist novelists can, moreover, be much more emphatic in showing that especially domestic realist fiction, like life, is not just about marriage or courtship, that there

are other relationships of equal, if not more, importance. Amy Robinson's essay, "An 'original and unlooked-for ending'?: Irony, the Marriage Plot, and the Antifeminism Debate in Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks*," further argues that Oliphant uses irony to disrupt established marriage plots. Humour operates as a narrative tool to expose the complexities of Oliphant's position, proving that there is no litmus test for determining whether her predominantly ironic representation of marriage as a career is more suitably labelled feminist or antifeminist.

In "Ghosts in the House: Margaret Oliphant's Uncanny Response to Feminist Success," Leila Walker likewise takes *Miss Marjoribanks* as her starting point to explore the centrality of the home in Oliphant's writing but aligns its creation of the homely with her stories of the afterlife. These ghost stories are curiously—uncannily—homely as well, as they depict heaven as analogous to an idealised domestic space. At the same time, however, the representation of female empowerment granted within the home renders it unhomely. What Robinson, Wagner, and Walker all stress by foregrounding very different aspects of Oliphant's *oeuvre* is that the shifting dividing line between the feminist and the antifeminist elements in her writing is not the only false dichotomy. Rather, her fiction capitalises on the contradictory concepts associated with various sub-genres as they emerged in the course of the nineteenth century. Heather Milton's discussion of the one Oliphant novel that has repeatedly been seen as a calculated foray into sensation fiction, *Salem Chapel* (1863), in a similar vein situates this negotiation of competing elements in its narrativisation of different forms of confession. In "The Female Confessor: Confession and Shifting Domains of Discourse in Margaret Oliphant's *Salem Chapel*," Milton suggests that the novel's seemingly bifurcated structure works as a deliberate fusion of different narrative modes that means to illustrate the controversies surrounding the transitions in confessional discourse: the sensational subplot questions the representation of confession within a domestic chronicle that presents the tensions between religious denominations primarily as social comedy.

Conversely, the next two chapters approach one of the perhaps most notorious sensation novelists of the Victorian age to explore her diverse

investment in—and narrative use of—divergent agendas, paradigms, and self-reflexively evoked critical discourse. Kate Mattacks’ “Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Secret*: An Antifeminist Amongst the New Women” argues that a gendered vision of Braddon as a subversive and therefore feminist novelist may have propelled her into a canon of revived popular novelists but that this has also singularly failed to account either for the complexities of her sensation fiction or for the texts that followed. Correlating these shifts in three novels across Braddon’s long and prolific career, Mattacks analyses central ambiguities in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), *One Thing Needful* (1886), and *The Fatal Three* (1888). Read alongside archival evidence taken from Braddon’s diaries and letters, the expression of often contradictory or peculiarly tempered leanings and tactics in her fiction indicates that it is both difficult and reductive to align her descriptions of empowered women who practise self-containment with a feminist agenda. Heather L. Braun similarly juxtaposes *Lady Audley’s Secret* as arguably the most successful, infamous, and now most regularly taught novel by a female sensation novelist with Braddon’s experimentation with the genre of the vampire tale in “Good Lady Duayne” (1896). In “Idle Vampires and Decadent Maidens: Sensation, the Supernatural, and Mary E. Braddon’s Disappointing *Femmes Fatales*,” Braun suggests that Braddon’s *oeuvre* accentuates a defining feature of both sensation and vampire stories by tearing down the generic divisions of romance and realism and simultaneously entertaining both supernatural and rational explanations for the delineated crimes and secrets. Yet Braddon renegotiates the desire for containment in a markedly ambiguous fashion that ultimately centres on the vampire at home.

Metaphors of vampirism in a domestic setting similarly inform Kiran Mascarenhas’ “*John Halifax, Gentleman*: A Counter Story.” Suggesting that the eponymous protagonist of Dinah Mulock Craik’s *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) prefigures late-Victorian vampires, this chapter reads the novel as a carefully encoded critique of the capitalist self-help ideology it seems to endorse. While Mascarenhas thus intriguingly dissects an understory beneath the seemingly simple storyline, Ann-Barbara Graff’s “Annesley Kenealy and Sarah Grand: Biopower and the Limits of the

New Woman” reads between the lines of the writing of diametrically opposite late-Victorian and Edwardian women writers to discover surprising affinities. Graff’s comparative analysis of Sarah Grand’s triumphant New Woman novels *Ideala* (1888) and *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and Annesley Kenealy’s anti-New Woman novel *A Water-Fly’s Wooing: A Drama in Black and White Marriages* (1914) reveals that the “biopolitical” tropes they both use are notably similar. This raises questions about the viability of the boundary between feminist New Woman fiction on the one hand and antifeminist anti-New Woman fiction on the other. While the final chapter likewise reassesses the shifts in literary culture marking the chronological end of Victorian fiction by focusing on the last phase of the penny weekly newspaper the *Dorothy Novelette*, its focus on the periodical press also describes a narrative arc that leads us back to Hamilton’s and Moruzi’s essays. Kate Macdonald’s “Ignoring the New Woman: Ten Years of a Victorian Weekly Fiction Magazine” analyses the changing content and rocky history of a cheap family magazine that, despite its emphatically conservative outlook, printed often contradictory pieces and which moreover featured fiction by such different authors as Braddon and Edith Nesbit as well as John Strange Winter (Henrietta Stannard) and Netta Syrett.

To be able to assess the immense spectrum of popular fiction produced in an era Oliphant prophetically termed “the age of female novelists” (555) in her 1855 article on “Modern Novelists—Great and Small,” we need to do more than acknowledge the significance of such ambiguities or seeming incongruities. They ask us to explode any neat categories, and most importantly, to strive towards a discussion of literature unimpeded by variously defined dividing lines, including those between “the great and the small.” Canon formations and reformations will only stop looking like ideologically invested conspiracies when we read—and write about—once-forgotten authors without any sense of partisanship or apologia. Perhaps this can only be achieved in combination with a renewed engagement in recovery work in which oxidation is not just a feminist issue. The unearthing and detailed reading of the immense wealth of still undiscovered literary works needs to proceed without any

specific lens in place. In appreciating the sheer vastness and variety of Victorian literary culture, we may then be able to create a critical climate in which there will be no more blinkered dismissals of work on a mere “minor” novel by a mere “minor” writer, whether male or female, domestic or sensational, antifeminist, feminist, or simply indifferent to ideological constructions, past or present. A much-needed explosion of just such dichotomies promises to lay bare the neglected complexities of domestic women’s writing and, in the process, to offer a significant remapping of nineteenth-century literary culture at large.

In departing from traditional recovery work, this collection thus aims to contribute to this new engagement with still neglected texts by paying detailed attention to the ways in which the debates surrounding antifeminism shaped the Victorian novel beyond the creation of sub-genres ambiguously classified as popular. Nineteenth-century women writers negotiated interlinked debates on aesthetic and moral, or ethical, dilemmas in revealingly divergent ways, compelling a close look at textual ambiguities and intertextual interchanges. This reassessment of the narratives of Victorian antifeminism is therefore essentially two-fold: it seeks to remedy dismissals of authors or works that have often been disregarded for not fitting into an ideologically constructed paradigm while concentrating on the diversity of the hitherto neglected works. Their reappraisal at once demands and helps to facilitate a more encompassing rethinking of female novelists’ role in literary culture in their changing classification, their marginalisation within the construction of (new) canons, and most importantly, their own resistance to reductive categorisations. *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* thereby aims to reconsider both the narratives created by antifeminist authors and the narratives circulated (and still circulating) about Victorian antifeminism. In analysing a range of material that testifies to the wide spectrum and increasingly self-reflexive interchanges of writing by Victorian women, the individual chapters work together to interrogate the versatile contributions of variously antifeminist writers as a creative shaping influence on the novel genre.