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Main content

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IN RECENT YEARS, the study and teaching of nineteenth-century women poets have been greatly facilitated: new anthologies have made texts available for general readers and for classroom use, and a wide range of historical and critical studies have begun to explore the richness of these poets' lives and works. The gradual and necessary process of recovering these works to our contemporary critical attention has resulted in expanded possibilities for teaching and writing the literary history of the Victorian period. This recovery work has been especially important for the fin-de-siecle period: several recent studies have demonstrated how the gendered language traditionally used to discuss fin-de-siecle literary practice tended to obscure the existence of female aesthetes and the ideological and historical conditions for women writers at the end of the nineteenth century. (1) Both the standard twentieth-century accounts of the male fin-de-siecle decadent or aesthetic poets and the focus on New Women novelists in more recent feminist criticism ignored many important women poets. To reexamine these writers not only recovers an important aspect of late-Victorian literary culture, but also reshapes the categories we use to write the literary history of the fin-de-siecle period.

As a feminist scholar and teacher, I have participated in the process of historical recovery of the work of women poets, and believe it to be fundamental to enhancing our historical understanding of the nineteenth century. Yet as a textual historian concerned with the material structures of literature--the production, reception, and distribution of texts during the Victorian period--I must confess to being wary of the very category with which I began this essay. To describe an alternative tradition of Victorian women poets, as useful as that can be, risks obscuring the complicated material history of literature's place within Victorian culture at large. John Guillory suggests that both the defenders of a traditional male-centred canon and the proponents of a newly expanded canon for study and teaching rely on an 'ideology of tradition', which 'collapses the history of canon formation into an autonomous history of literature, which is always a history of writers and not of writing'. (2) The focus on individual writers or groups of writers is central to how we organise our syllabi and our scholarship; to try to imagine what a different kind of literary history might look like goes against many of our basic assumptions. Guillory suggests that a history of writing should first explore 'what genres of writing count as "literature" in a given historical context, a question that logically precedes the question of what criteria of value may affirm or deny the canonicity of particular writers'. (3) Yet our methodological tools for considering the questions of literary history and canons of taste tend invariably to rely upon lists of writers.

In this essay, I want to explore an alternative approach to writing literary history that maintains a double focus: on what kinds of writing 'count as literature' and why; and on the relation of that cultural value to the politics of gender. To do...

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FIN DE SIECLE The Age of Oscar Wilde INTRODUCTION. Standing as we do at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the closing years of the nineteenth may seem a long time ago. Yet only now are they passing out of living memory. The New Woman was demanding the Emancipation of Women. The plethora of issues that this raised were being openly discussed in influential journals, such as The Nineteenth Century. All whirling towards a common end(6). By 1899 it seemed pass, at least to Arthur Symons. In 1893, he had published an essay entitled The Decadent Movement in Literature. There are two things to remark in the poets of the nineties: the distinction of their work and the tragedy of their lives (8). W.B.Yeats referred to the poets of the 1890s as the Tragic Generation'. Read all Shakespeare sonnets here, along with an explanation of each, intended to offer an easy read-through to aid understanding. The first 126 of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a young man, and the last 28 addressed to a woman – a mysterious 'dark lady'. Jump to a section: Read all sonnets | Famous sonnets | Publishing the sonnets | Sonnet dedications. What is a Shakespearean sonnet? Shakespeare's sonnets are poems of expressive ideas and thoughts that are layered with multiple meanings, and always have two things in common: 1. All sonnets have fourteen lines. 2. All sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. Read more about what a sonnet is, and iambic pentameter. Read all 154 of Shakespeare's sonnets. An interest in 'forgotten' women poets of the fin de siècle led to many interesting figures being critically resurrected in fascinating studies from around 1995 onwards. Yet few have become the... This process is experimental and the keywords may be updated as the learning algorithm improves. This is a preview of subscription content, log in to check access. Preview. Eighteen women poets appear for the first time in the new edition, including Charlotte Bronte and UA Fanthorpe. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Stevie Smith and Emily Bronte are among those making a return appearance. Ironically, it is easier to give some flavour of several of their lives by mention of their relationship to better-known men. Frances Cornford was the granddaughter of Charles Darwin and mother of John Cornford, the Spanish Civil War poet. Prof Janet Todd, biographer of Aphra Behn and Mary Wollstonecraft, agreed yesterday that most women poets did not stand comparison with the best men. "But they stand comparison with the least of the men." And she said there was a case for their inclusion.