



**Neither Surface nor Distant: Feminine Sociality in  
Helen C. Black's *Notable Women Authors of the Day***

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**Abstract**

This essay considers the scholarly reception and recovery of non-canonical women's writing through a late-Victorian collection of interviews, Helen C. Black's *Notable Women Authors of the Day* (1893). In their superficial focus on the authors' appearances and social graces, Black's interviews with novelists including Rhoda Broughton, Eliza Lynn Linton, and many names now unknown, are challenging to integrate into a (proto-)feminist history of women's writing. Meanwhile, if critical forays into "surface reading" and "distant reading" remind us that spatial metaphors describe our interpretive practices, Black's interviews cue a different spatiality altogether: they simulate a social exchange rather than a knowledge transfer, largely through Black's use of the second-person tense, which allows her to mimic the hospitality of the authors who receive her. At the home of Mrs Hungerford, for example, Black writes, "Your hostess draws you in hastily out of the cold ... a stream of ruddy lights ... seems to welcome you, too" (Black 2011: 120). She formally positions her reader as the object of an attention more compatible with sociality than criticism. Black's narratological perspective sets up a receptivity antithetical to canonical emphasis on originality and exclusiveness, which, given the exclusion of all of Black's authors from the canon, seems only logical.

**Key words**

non-canonical writing; women authors; Helen C. Black; sociality; narratology.

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## Neither Surface nor Distant: Feminine Sociality in Helen C. Black's *Notable Women Authors of the Day*

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The recovery of out-of-print literature by women has been a central aim of feminist literary scholarship for almost fifty years, but what we find in literature that has been lost can be challenging to accommodate within feminist interests and political values. As Kate MacDonald writes in “Ignoring the New Woman: Ten Years of a Victorian Weekly Fiction Magazine,” “the periodicals of the fin de siècle have been scoured for, among other trends, evidence of socialist writing, first-wave feminism, and the birth of modernism, but publications which did not contain such material have been largely ignored” (MacDonald 2009: 298). The selective excavation of subjects that MacDonald refers to often justifies our recovery projects, but how dedicated are we to the rediscovery of texts that promote dated if not offensive values, and how equipped are we as scholars to read these works critically? This essay responds to those questions by first reflecting upon three feminist approaches to recuperated literature by Victorian women: Mary Poovey’s famous (or infamous) dismissal of a non-canonical novel at the British Women Writers Conference (1999), Carol Poster’s equally well-known (but less controversial) pitch for the preservation of women’s genre fiction (1996), and a broader consideration of the way that the recovery of women writers (but not necessarily their writing) informs feminist literary studies. After this review, I turn to the case study of Helen C. Black’s 1893 *Notable Women Authors of the Day*. Black’s “biographical sketches” of popular women writers were first serialised in the *Lady’s Pictorial: A Newspaper for the Home* in weekly installments 1890–1 (Bassett 2011: 6). The interviews (and compiled edition) contribute to a late-century enthusiasm for the author as celebrity, first popularised in Britain by Edmund Yates in his “Celebrities at Home” series for the *World* in the late 1870s (Bassett 2012: 133). Black’s interviews addressed middlebrow women readers and purported to acquaint them with famous writers such as Marie Corelli and Florence Marryat on a personal, even intimate level. The interviews largely take place in the authors’ homes, and mingle flattery with observations about the modesty and approachability of the authors. In the “Notable Women” series she found a formula that evidently paid off, emphasising the appearances and domestic accomplishments of her subjects often in more detail than their writing. Black’s approach thus challenges feminist criticism’s common foci on women’s social advancement and professional achievement, but also conventional literary criticism’s privileging of originality and aesthetic technique. Her interviews, furthermore, avoid such hierarchical judgments, insisting in their place on the notable women’s modesty, typicality, or approachability.

Critical trends routinely exemplify how spatial metaphors describe interpretive practices – as this issue of *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal* explores. In “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” a 2009 essay published in *Representations*, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best challenge the hermeneutic tradition that positions the literary critic as the translator of latent meanings, inaccessible or at least not obvious to the amateur reader. Their championship of the

“surface” does not extol superficiality but the interpretive opportunities afforded by the manifest text. Rather than displace a visual image like Esther’s pockmarked face at the end of *Bleak House* into a symbolic meaning (a sign of Esther’s illegitimate and so blemished status), surface readers might turn their focus to the literal cue, in the form of the smallpox she contacted. At the other end of the spatial spectrum is Franco Moretti’s “distant reading,” which foregoes the specific (text, image or author) in favour of the large-scale patterns that can be derived from data analytics. “Distant Reading” moves the onus of discovery and explanation to a level that the individual reader cannot access or discern, and makes observations about the aggregate trends of a literary genre, epoch, or semantic sign. Critics of distant reading almost necessarily invoke the “close reading” that informs most literary instruction and constitutes a more traditional mode of evidence-gathering. As I discuss later in this essay, Black’s interviews invite a spatial dynamic of their own that none of these trends fully account for: they transfer the reader into the social sphere of the “notable author,” allowing her to imagine an immediate relationship rather than a knowledge transfer. Following Black’s perspectival cues, including her use of the second-person and present tenses, the visual emphasis of her interviews generates analysis that the search for political values does not surface.

### Does the Recovery of Lost Literature Change the Canon?

A charged example of the complexity of reading lost literature occurred at the inaugural British Women Writers Conference in 1999. When asked by the conference organisers to respond to their call for the recovery of forgotten literature by women, keynote speaker Mary Poovey took their prompt very literally. She chose an obscure writer, Ellen Pickering, and read her most successful novel: *Nan Darrell, or the Gipsy Mother* (1839). As Poovey explained in the plenary and later in an article “Recovering Ellen Pickering,” published in 2000 in the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, she approached the novel with a series of questions in mind:

Can I draw any conclusions about canon formation from recovering the work of a writer whose novels have probably never been taught in a modern classroom? Is there any value in recovering such work, especially since Pickering’s novels are not now, and probably will never be, available in modern editions? Can such novels be made interesting to modern readers? If they can, does this tell us more about the novels themselves or about the critical tools with which we locate our own interests in the works we read?

(Poovey 2000: 448)

Poovey summarises *Nan Darrell* as a romance with Gothic overtones that features a marriage plot, rival suitors, and the heroine’s eventual return to the respectable station of her birth. Her judgment of the novel is succinct:

Do I think that Pickering’s works should be canonized? No, frankly, I don’t. The writing style is inflated, the plots are both torturously complicated and conventional, and the generic innovation is scant at best ... I suspect that a reader in the 1840s would have been less engaged by Pickering’s self-conscious references to the novel’s contrivances than I am, and I also suspect that Nan Darrell’s gypsy blood would have seemed less noteworthy to early readers than it does to me.

(Poovey 2000: 448)

Despite this damning judgment, Poovey did not completely dispute the importance of preserving once popular books: “It is important that rare book libraries collect and preserve the works even of novelists like Ellen Pickering,” she writes: “That novels like *Nan Darrell* are available enables

scholars to test our critical tools – not so much to evaluate the lost writers as to evaluate our tools’ adequacy to other, canonical texts we consult more frequently” (Poovey 2000: 448). We should preserve the *Nan Darrells* of history, then, as materials that confirm the canon: “If literary criticism is the servant of literature, then doesn’t literature have to be worthy of our reverent attention?” (Poovey 2000: 451).

Another approach to out-of-print and forgotten texts considers their capacity to disrupt the canon. In a 1996 essay in *College English*, “Oxidation is a Feminist Issue,” Carol Poster makes an urgent case for the preservation of popular nineteenth-century novels printed on paper high in acidity, and so rapidly deteriorating. Poster refers to a 1992 report by a US commission on Preservation and Access that defined the “scope and urgency” of the problem: “more than 80 million volumes in the nation’s research libraries, about one quarter of our libraries’ holdings, and more than 2.5 billion pages in the nation’s archives are in danger of being lost through oxidization over the next 15 or 20 years” (quoted in Poster 1996: 289). This issue is of particular relevance for Victorian scholars: estimating more than 40,000 Victorian novels outside of the canon, the commission admits that it will be difficult for libraries and institutions to decide exactly which works should be saved. In 1996, Poster did not foresee digitisation’s great (though not complete) alleviation of this problem, and more books today have been digitally archived than she could have dreamed about when the preservation method was Xeroxing. But in addition to the methods of conservation, Poster is concerned about the likely victims of an oxidisation triage: she warns that the vast field of women’s genre fiction will be low on the list of cultural artefacts to be saved:

The allocation of the limited funds available for preservation may be so heavily weighted towards multiple editions of canonical authors as to allow many more works than necessary by non-canonical authors to vanish into oblivion, leaving future Victorian scholars in much the same situation as current classical scholars of possessing huge numbers of authors only in lists of titles, fragmentary excerpts, and paraphrases within commentaries. What makes this pessimistic scenario so probable is the weight of reception. The voices of the thousands of scholars who work with Dickens, and the hundreds who work with Collins overpower the voices of the handful of scholars working on Ouida or Wood.

(Poster 1996: 295)

Poster’s recommendation is informed by the awareness that traditional considerations of canonical value diminish women’s popular fiction. With this likelihood in mind she makes a clear recommendation:

If the importance of novelists is partially a function of the number of critical articles written about them, we need to write and publish articles and present papers about popular female authors ... In our broad articles about literary themes, periods, and theories, we must include illustrations from popular as well as “literary” authors ... We must support efforts ... to reprint Victorian novelists, and assign their books in our classes ... When we notice the brittleness of a book by an unrecovered author in our libraries, we must take matters in our own hands, walk over to the nearest Xerox machines, and start copying.

(Poster 1996: 302)

Poster’s call for preservation anticipates extenuating consequences: by Xeroxing books in danger of disappearing, we would be readily able to make and disperse copies of what was then too fragile to borrow, and so isolated in individual collections. With a much-expanded field of women’s literature at our discretion, she surmises, we would have an archive that would allow us to rethink the patriarchal biases informing the traditional canon. In part, this is still a relevant

article today for the very reason that makes it dated: we *do* have a radically different field of literature from which to draw in 2019 than we did in 1996, thanks to digitisation, but availability does not guarantee a broadening of the canon or even scholarly interest. As MacDonald writes about scholarship on periodicals, scholars evince a decided tilt towards the content that has current appeal and political identification: protofeminism, progressive politics, resistance to the status quo. If Poster's entreaty for preservation amounts to a shoring up of feminist ammunition to combat a patriarchal tradition, Poovey's blunt dismissal of minor work leaves in place the idea of canonical value, if not *a* particular canon. The examples are not equivalent, however, insofar as Poovey's judgment is based on a representative text, and Poster's on a political understanding of the vulnerability (and disruptive promise) of women's art.

More recently, the already noted metric of distant reading has shifted the scales of recovery towards Poster's more sociological than aesthetic position. Using metadata as a critical tool to examine data sets in the hundreds or thousands cannot adjudicate the value of a single text, but can aggregate categories of texts like women's popular novels of a particular time and place. But whether the detection of verbal or syntactical patterns (for instance) in such a corpus is enlightening depends upon who you ask. For me, in the context of feminist literary history, distant reading's substitution of single example for mass scale replicates the systemic power that has imperilled the survival and significance of marginalised literature in the first place.

## **Is the Story of the Author More Interesting than the Story that She Wrote?**

Another approach to historical, popular literature by women writers concentrates on the writer, and either tacitly or explicitly bypasses close examination of the fiction or journalism she wrote. In the 1970s and early 1980s, second-wave feminist criticism resonated with scholars and readers in part because it was so richly infused with biographical accounts such as the stories about Charlotte Brontë writing *Jane Eyre* in her father's presence but without his knowledge, or Mary Shelley conceiving of *Frankenstein* in response to Byron's invitation to write supernatural stories. The titles of important monographs from this period underscore the emphasis on the woman writer herself: *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Elaine Showalter, 1977), *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Ellen Moers, 1976), *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, 1979). Two digital forerunners of the preservation and dissemination of non-canonical women's writing, the Orlando Project and The Victorian Women Writers Project (VWWP), both established in the mid-90s at the University of Alberta and Indiana University, respectively, do not explicitly differentiate between the fields of biographical and literary analysis. The Orlando Project promotes its "constantly expanding and improving storehouse of knowledge about women's lives and writing" and allows users to "search and recombine detailed accounts of authors' lives and writing careers" (<https://www.artsmn.Ualberta.ca/orlando/?p=2876>); the VWWP's objective is "the exposure of lesser-known British women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/welcome.do>).

The challenges of dated content can make a woman writer's experience – especially the professional disadvantages she almost necessarily faced in the nineteenth century – a more viable or identifiable topic than her work. The life of Ellen Pickering, for instance, might better resonate with feminist critics interested in early Victorian women writers' struggles to publish than in

Pickering's prosaic love stories about gypsies and lost inheritances. Such a preference also complicates the conservation effort: do we preserve or even disseminate Pickering's 16 novels as proxies for their author's professional efforts or biography? In the field of print journalism, scholars including Alexis Easley, Laurel Brake, Julie Codell, and Kay Boardman, to name just a few, have investigated the professional and ideological challenges facing Victorian women writers and editors: how they used print journalism to challenge and contest existing norms by constructing and circulating positions more compatible with women's progress than the content of much of the writing itself. Extracting such arguments from explicitly orthodox texts like Black's remains a critical difficulty, however, as it demands that we overlook much manifest content. The preservation process that Poster called for in 1996 is well underway through digitisation, but it demonstrates that availability alone does not transform reading habits and/or scholarly evaluations. If a recovered book is justified or explained by a lateral argument about its author's life, or even about the broader status of women's art, then its literariness is ceded to its historical or sociological significance.

While in no way do I challenge the idea that sociological and biographical examination of the writer is a valuable contribution to knowledge, its tacit correlation with literary study can obscure what a formal and narrative analysis of a text can reveal, even when its subject matter is difficult to relate to. A biographical approach also contributes to historicism's continued dominance as the hermeneutic key to Victorian literature. Textual analysis, moreover, need not preclude socio-political investigation: rather, it finds this register embedded in narratological form. A growing number of studies in feminist narratology interpret narrative form as a revealing embodiment of historically specific perspectives (Fludernik 2003; Peters 2002; Lanser and Warhol 2015). Attending to the construction of the discursive identity of the original audience, for instance, may diffuse the disappointments of content that Poovey focuses on in *Nan Darrell*: it does not convince us to like the work, but tries to understand its original appeal.

## Black's Notable Authors as Women

Helen Black is best known today for *Notable Women Authors of the Day*, but substantial criticism on this collection, beyond a passing reference to its popularity with middlebrow women, remains modest. Not much is known about Black herself. We do know that she became a successful journalist after the death of her husband in the late 1870s, supporting herself through regular publication in popular magazines aimed at the middle-class woman reader (Bassett 2011: 6). Her process of selection in *Notable Women Authors* is curious for its neglect of authors like Margaret Oliphant, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mary Augusta Ward, and Charlotte Yonge – all of whom were alive when she was conducting her interviews and all considerably more “notable” than some of the authors included.<sup>1</sup> The better-known subjects of Black's interviews – Eliza Lynn Linton, Rhoda Broughton, Sarah Grand, Marie Corelli, Florence Marryat and Annie S. Swan – join authors about whom we know virtually nothing today: Augusta De Grasse Stevens, Lady Duffus Hardy, Mrs Edward Kennard, Jean Middlemass. Nevertheless, Black's presentation of the authors she interviews is ecumenical, in part because their lives and lifestyles are the

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<sup>1</sup> In one of the few articles that examine *Notable Women of the Day* in any depth, Cheryl Wilson asks this same question about Black's selection process (Wilson 2009: 65).

central object of her study. Her interviews are often dominated by her lengthy and flattering descriptions of the authors' appearances, as well as detailed descriptions of their houses, gardens, and drawing rooms. Scholars who hope to find in these 30 short interviews critical analysis of the novels, their genre, or consideration of *why* these novelists appealed to the late-Victorian public are likely to be disappointed. "[T]he lack of depth [in the interviews] is at times frustrating," admits Catherine Pope tactfully in her Introduction to the 2011 reprint of the book (Pope 2011: 11). Pope determines that Black's superficial focus on the appearance of the authors and their domestic trappings inoculates their femininity from the profit motive of the professional writer. Critics writing about *Notable Women* agree with Pope that Black's framing of the authors as beautiful and feminine is a defensive operation. For Troy Bassett, Black "makes the women authors seem non-threatening, showing their primary roles as women" (Bassett 2012: 165), and Margaret Beetham refers to the "process of representing the writing woman as essentially feminine rather than professional" (Beetham 2003: 124). All of these critics align the scholarly interest of tracking women's professional progress with the hypothesis that the woman reader of the interviews was a perhaps reluctant but malleable witness to the process of feminine professionalisation, and, most importantly for my emphasis, that the Victorian woman reader was, at some level, engaged with, influenced by, or concerned about the question of a professional woman's femininity. (Given the long-standing Victorian association between respectable middle-class womanhood and the domestic sphere, women who worked for a living could be seen as "unnatural," even towards the end of the century.)

Yet when we consider the interviews in their original serial form, Black's narratological choices can indicate a reader who is invited to participate in a social experience rather than the literary or political assessment more typical of critics today. The *Lady's Pictorial* was founded in 1880 as a rival to the long-running magazine the *Queen*. The audience of the *Lady's Pictorial* was arguably of a slightly lower class than that of its rival, but both magazines appealed to upper-middle-class women or those who aspired to this leisured class (Bassett 2012: 154) in which womanly accomplishments like flower arranging or needlework were more conventional pursuits than professional writing. My hypothesis about the social or experiential orientation of the magazine reader, discussed below, draws heavily upon Black's consistent use of the second-person and present tense in her interviews: "Your hostess draws you in hastily out of the cold" (Black 2011: 120). There are several ways to interpret second-person form: it can stand in for a narrator's interior monologue, address a particular or general reader or readers, or, more abstractly, infer what Mieke Bal calls "the gnomonic you," which can connote an unspecified "one" or "anyone" (Bal 2004: 25). Black's use combines these signals and constructs an individual but generic reader who is invited to inhabit the interviews by way of Black's friendly but strategic effacement. By writing to "you" and imaginatively ceding her position to the reader's experience, Black's profusion of sensory and visual details suggests that she is setting a scene for the reader's projection. The second-person form, furthermore, allows Black to undermine the critical habit of ordering the language of a narrative voice into the contours of an individual identity speaking to a specific reader (Siegle 1986: 17). Just as the notable women welcome Black into their homes and she records the visit, she directs a similarly deferential, if illusory, reception to her reader – the formal emergence of a constantly refracting object of attention more familiar to dialogic poetics than literary criticism. David Herman calls this kind of strategy "contextual anchoring": a process by which cues in narrative discourse establish the relationship between the reader and the scene of her reading. For Joanna Gavins,

the success or conviction of this relationship rests on the proximity of the projected story world and the reader: the closer the resemblance between the life of the [narrator] and the life of the real reader, the more likely it is that the reader will be comfortable inhabiting the new projected text-world persona.

(Gavins 2007: 86)

Where Gavins's description of the reader's "comfort" and "inhabitation" of the projected setting is euphemistic, Black's accommodation of her reader's comfort stretches towards literalism in its attention to the physical experience of the interview scenes. Arriving, for instance, in Mrs Linton's flat, Black writes, "You step out into a corridor where are arranged a stand of [fire extinguishers] with a couple of hydrants, backed by printed directions for their use, and are shown into the library of the distinguished author; but ere there is time to look around, the door opens, and [the author] enters" (Black 2011: 19). The sentence that introduces the famous author also notes the fire hydrants in her foyer; the surplus of such detail may suggest an especially capacious scale of values, but cumulatively another impression emerges. Black's scenic enumeration is not meant to enlighten or instruct the reader, though it may do that in a contextual way, so much as to bring her along: on offer is the experience of a visit. Black's narrative cues in the context of the magazine interviews construct a reader whose focus is self-interested and local, a reader who seems to have largely specular and material horizons of expectation, as in Flaubert's description of Emma Bovary's reading preferences: "in Eugene Sue [Emma] studied descriptions of the furniture; she read Balzac and George Sand, seeking imaginary satisfaction for her own desires" (Flaubert 2008: 52). Alexis Easley agrees that materially focused texts like Black's blur the distinction between an author's possessions and her literary output: "the focus on the authors' homes and texts as fashionable obsessions had the effect of locating their work, along with their possessions, in the realm of the ephemeral, and sometimes sensational, consumer interest" (Easley 2011: 141).

An experiential focus also helps to explain Black's minute attention to social dynamics. As she takes the long train and boat journey from London to visit Mrs Hungerford in Cork County, Ireland, her writing mimics the live rhetoric of hospitality:

You have resolved to accept a hospitable invitation from Mrs. Hungerford, the well-known author of "Molly Bawn," etc., to visit her at her lovely home, St. Brenda's, Bandon, co. Cork, where a "hearty Irish welcome" is promised ...

[Y]ou arrive at Euston just in time for the 7.15 a.m. express, and find that by the kindness of the station-master a compartment is reserved, and every arrangement, including an excellent meal, is made for your comfort ... On reaching Holyhead at 1.30 to the minute, you are met by the courteous and attentive marine superintendent, Captain Cay, R.N., who takes you straight on board the *Ireland*, the newest addition to the fleet of fine ships.

(Black 2011: 117)

At Mrs Hungerford's, the notable author complements Black's solicitous voice: "Your hostess draws you in hastily out of the cold ... a stream of ruddy lights from half-a-dozen crimson shaded lamps ... seems to welcome you, too" (Black 2011: 120). By short-circuiting her authority, Black almost imperceptibly transfers the reader from her own supervision to Mrs Hungerford's, and when the famous author closes the interview with a modest aside, "we have spent quite too much time over my stupid self" (Black 2011: 125), she echoes – or models – Black's own conspicuous smokescreen. Narrated in extemporaneous present tense, these visits more closely resemble a "social call" than the literary interview. The serial form of the original

interviews in the *Lady's Pictorial* further accustoms the reader to a predictable experience, which must have been integral to their appeal.

Scholars of the book collection *Notable Women Authors of the Day* largely agree that the confirmation process offered by the interviews concerns the women writers and their disputable femininity, but the original magazine readers, as I have been arguing, had a more self-interested agenda. Talia Schaffer writes in *The Forgotten Female Aesthete* that “the woman’s fashion magazines position themselves as the reader’s helpers ... to help foster other women’s self-esteem” (Schaffer 2000: 110), and for Beetham, the women’s fashion magazines represented themselves as a friend rather than an authority (Beetham 2003: 124). Following these cues, Black’s interviews and the consumer-orientation of the magazine propose that a confirmation of the reader’s *own* femininity, taste, and class identity is the tacit opportunity at hand. Imagining an evaluative process that is more mirror than magnifying glass, the following descriptions in their magazine form suggest similarities between the famous writers and readers:

- Nothing less than a genius is Mrs. Hungerford at gardening. (Black 2011: 123)
- Helen Mathers is a great needlewoman ... essentially a domestic woman. (Black 2011: 90–1)
- Mrs. Stannard is a thoroughly domestic woman. (Black 2011: 68)
- Mrs. Lynn Linton is a great adept with her needle. (Black 2011: 24)
- Mrs. Edward Kennard is ... clever with her needle. (Black 2011: 180)

The magazine reader, consuming this information, might feel a kinship with the notable women, which has the imaginary benefit of elevating *her*, the reader, to notable company. The scholar, evaluating these statements, sees compensatory or defensive posturing relative to the questionable status of the professional late-Victorian woman writer. One of the primary differences wrought by attention to textual mediation, whether the interview appears in the magazine or the book collection, is the presence and absence of anxiety: for the scholar/critic, an atmosphere of struggle is always already present, even (or especially) when buried under Black’s lavish compliments. For the magazine reader, the vicarious staging of the interviews as social visits seems designed to expunge all anxiety, and like a magazine can, summon the viewer into an aesthetic and social dream world. Where the scholarly and critical business of literature assiduously seeks, classifies, proclaims, and individuates, Black erases the sharp division between subject and object, notable woman and reader. Despite the fact that the interviews – especially in the book form – purport to be “about” the notable authors, they routinely deflect questions about their professional authorship. Their studied politeness maintains a reciprocal rather than probing conversation, performing a model of uncritical sociality. Victorian critics experienced some of the same frustrations with Black’s interviews in book form as we do; an anonymous reviewer for the *Critic* complains about her preoccupation with the beauty of the women writers: “I can see no reason why, merely because a woman writes, she should be described as good looking. That is not the highest compliment that can be paid to intellect” (“The Lounger” 1893: 36). The critic follows the cue of Black’s title and presupposes an authoritative literary interview, a process dedicated to the project of *knowing*, and registers the disconnection between the interviews in their original magazine form and their compilation into a book.

A common claim about celebrity interviews like Black’s, which were increasingly popular forms of journalism in the later century, is that their appeal lies in their imitation of intimacy. For Richard Salmon, situating an interview in an author’s home allowed it to function “as a signifying space in which it became possible to represent public figures as creatures of privacy” (Salmon 1997: 109). For Bassett, celebrity interviews answer to the reader’s “desire for intimacy

with a famous author” (Bassett 2012: 263). But what can we make of the constant elision of attention that these interviews model on a narratological level? The self-effacing pattern they establish elects that all players in the scene – Black, the notable author, and the implied reader or readers – shirk the particularity of an intimate scene. The authors sound very much like each other, and Black’s pronomial “you” lacks the individualisation of a direct command: it is not the vividly focalised “Reader, I married him,” but an unspecific address to an indeterminate number of readers. Edmund Yates’s “Celebrities at Home” series for the *World* accords more predictably with the literary project of knowing and individuating. In his profile of Mary Braddon, for example, Yates spends most of his time simply watching Braddon at work in her study, and observes the distance between the “outward expression” of her identity and the “hidden spring” of her personality (Easley 2011: 144). In contrast, Black repurposes the word “personality” by using it to conflate outside and inside, taking the former as a satisfying substitute for the latter, as we see in the following description of Mrs Linton’s “personality”:

Her personality may be described thus: tall, upright, and stately in appearance, the keen, but kindly bright blue eyes smiling through the gold-rimmed glasses ... She is clad in a suitable black dress, trimmed with het, a white lace-cap partially covers the thick grey hair, which escapes in a tiny natural curl or two on each side of the smooth, intellectual forehead.

(Black 2011: 19)

Black confines selfhood to material description, and the sameness of the interviews alerts us to the fact that individuation is achieved through descriptions of the authors’ houses, décor, and clothing more than their personalities (as that word is normally understood). Black’s surface focus cannot be attributed solely to the form of the periodical, but rather to the interplay between fashion magazine and woman reader and its canny construction of an exclusive club that any woman can join.

The off-hand atmosphere of Black’s present tense further dispels intimacy or even deliberation. By walking the reader through the interview scenes as if they are unfolding in real time, Black circumvents the possibility of any meta-commentary, such as references to her having done such an interview before, or having received similar answers to her questions, and so she evades the perspective that would prompt her to generalise about “women writers” either critically or sociologically. The experience of reading the interviews back to back is not an accretive deepening. Black’s presentation of the notable writers’ consistent modesty underscores the sense that the more time we spend with them, the less likely we are to be distracted by their literary success. The authors often profess to have little to say, and many of them treat their literary success as a curious phenomenon they cannot fully explain:

Helen Mathers: “[I]ndeed I can’t say in the least how my books get written.” (Black 2011: 86)  
 Jessie Fothergill: “It seems to me that I have not much to say of [my novels].” (Black 2011: 197)  
 Mrs Chetwynd: “I am surprised that [my novels] have held their own at all.” (Black 2011: 250)  
 Helen Mathers “has done nothing to speak of lately ... has had nothing to say.” (Black 2011: 89)  
 Mrs Lyall on writing a novel: “I had very little notion of what I had undertaken.” (Black 2011: 144)  
 Florence Marryat: “I have no idea, till I take it up to correct, what I have written.” (Black 2011: 100)

While it is very likely – to follow a dominant line of feminist criticism – that these authors are speaking in deference to their conservative audience, and still subtly managing to “resist” such conservatism through their sheer success as authors, we cannot know this for sure. Nor can we know the extent of Black’s editorial influence over the interviews that purport to be informal,

candid conversations. An emphasis on the visual and spatial implications of techniques like Black's use of the second person not only exposes the interpretive gap between reading a scholarly edition and a serial in a fashion magazine. It also recuperates the manifest text itself, similar to the interpretive approach of "surface reading" described earlier. Reading these interviews on a deep or symptomatic level, one might treat the statements quoted above with more suspicion than a surface reader, seeing Marryat's "I have no idea, till I take it up to correct, what I have written" as a sign of false modesty or the desire to seem disinterested in the fruits of her successful career. A surface reader, by contrast, might give more credence to Mrs. Reeves's (for example) having done "nothing to speak of lately" and having "nothing to say."

Furthermore, the narrative that has underwritten much of feminist criticism's recuperation processes and reclaiming techniques may falter in the conscious choice to insist upon the literary *value* of books like Black's, if we understand "value" in the way that Poovey defines it: originality, aesthetic innovation, contribution to knowledge. In magazine form, the interviews have a different kind of value – entertainment, vicarious socialising, and commercial profit for the author and magazine. To read the interviews and perhaps, by extension, the popular novels written by the "notable women" thus requires attention to the gap between scholarly constructions of gender politics and the localised, pleasure-seeking agendas of those whom John Sutherland has disparagingly referred to as "indiscriminate female readers" (Sutherland 2014: 162). What diminishes the interviews in terms of individuation or the expression of personal subjectivity (for both the novelists and Black as narrator) denotes a social orientation that literary criticism does not conventionally appreciate. Black's narratorial positioning relative to the novelists suggests, instead, a projection so comprehensive that the differences between narrator, interviewee, and even reader (insofar as the reader is invited to imagine herself in the scene) dissolve. The lack of differentiation that would be considered amateur and unimaginative in fiction renders, in magazine form, a careful and democratising synthesis that readers evidently enjoyed. Further, if fiction usually implies a single author or narrator as its source, Black's identity construct projects a group of equals.

After the publication of Poovey's "Recovering Ellen Pickering," Jill Campbell wrote a perceptive rebuttal, also published in the *Yale Journal of Criticism*. She disputed Poovey's insistence on literary quality (itself always up to debate) over and against the possibilities of a more capacious criticism. Campbell writes,

The question for the British Women Writers Association, I would think, is not whether a randomly chosen text by a woman author "should be canonized" (448) but rather, what varieties of historical and critical endeavors recover the susceptibility of particular works by women writers to literary (as well as historical) appreciation and analysis.

(Campbell 2000: 264–5)

In seeking methods that can make historical texts like *Nan Darrell* "susceptible" to "appreciation and analysis," Campbell puts the burden of interpretation on the critic to find out why certain texts resonated with their readers in their time and place – not to judge whether or not they are canonical and so transcendent of time and place. Black's narratological perspective sets up a group dynamic antithetical to canonical values, which, given the exclusion of all of Black's authors *from* the canon, seems only logical. Campbell's approach implicitly challenges the practices that drive modern scholars (or their markets) to recover literature when (or if) it accords with our own interests. This is not to question or diminish all interpretations (feminist or otherwise) that expose subtly radical agendas in overtly conservative texts. However, when those

investigations must depend partly or entirely on non-textual evidence, they do not make a strong case for any recovery projects, nor do they do justice to the social formations that can be extracted from literary form.

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