

Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market by Linda H. Peterson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. xv, 289 pp. + 28 b/w illus. ISBN 0-691-14017-0. \$35.00; £19.95.

The title of Linda H. Peterson's new contribution to the study of Victorian women as writers suggests, she says, "becoming" in two senses: "the entry of individual women into authorship as revealed in the beginning moments of their literary careers, and the development of the woman of letters as a conceptual category during the nineteenth century." The "myths" that the title references are those explanations and justifications for authorship that were, she argues, "more enabling than disabling" for women in the nineteenth century, allowing women writers "to claim new territories of endeavor and high achievement" for their work. And this is where, Peterson argues, her study diverges from the pioneering work that has gone before: books by such women of letters as Dorothy Mermin, Mary Poovey, Elaine Showalter, and others. As Peterson notes, such work tended to emphasize the "limitations and lack of opportunities that women faced or the social norms they transgressed in the act of publishing," whereas this book helps us to see the ways in which women negotiated, in a variety of ways, whether successfully or not, the conditions of the literary marketplace. And while Peterson gives full credit to recent studies of women's professionalism during that period, she claims that her approach differs from such work by "situating women's authorship within larger nineteenth-century debates about the profession of letters," including debates in the early decades of the century over the very central question of whether authorship was indeed a profession – for either men or women.

As one might expect from a book by Linda H. Peterson, the pages of *Becoming a Woman of Letters* are crammed with information: various documents, journals, letters, autobiographies, biographies, and periodicals, as well as poetry and fiction yield up their treasures through her rigorous research. In order to situate the women writers on whom the study focuses within the larger publishing context Peterson casts a wide net. Yet this is not dry documentation. With pellucid and engaging prose and through liberal use of fascinating details, the world of these writers comes to life. We hear of Harriet Martineau being ordered home from London by her mother, yet later writing to her mother that because of her newly-won success as a writer she is "now a citizen of the world as any professional *son* ... could be," and the hard-working Charlotte Riddell signing over copyright on a dozen novels as collateral for a loan to save her husband's business, one which subsequently went bankrupt. And then there is the portrait of Alice Meynell writing full-time while bearing eight children, dressing purposefully so as to appear the professional art critic at public exhibitions, and being described by a friend as