

Victorian Women Poets edited by Alison Chapman. *Essays and Studies* 2003, vol. 6. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003. viii, 206 pp. + 5 b/w illus. ISBN 0-85991-787-8. \$50.00; £30.00.

The eight essays comprising this volume build upon the recovery of women poets in the 1990s but move beyond the bio-critical approaches that dominated the earlier decade. Instead, as Alison Chapman notes in her introduction, *Victorian Women Poets* situates analysis in the wider contexts of “literary history and canonicity, political poetics, print culture, and genre.”

Glennis Byron demonstrates that integrating women authors into the study of Victorian poetry generates new perspectives on literary history. “Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique” compellingly argues that when dramatic monologues by women are factored in, the minor poets look less idiosyncratic, Robert Browning more so. Drawing upon prior work by Dorothy Mermin, Herbert F. Tucker, and Cynthia Scheinberg, Byron contends that women’s dramatic monologues typically sympathize with rather than ironize speakers and emphasize representations of contemporary life, shifting the form’s emphasis to social critique. Women’s dramatic monologues hence ironize social conditions that produce problematic identities more than they ironize personae, especially since sympathy for speakers displaces attention from inward to outward determinants of self.

Natalie Houston stages a similar intervention in literary history in “Towards a New History: *Fin-de-Siècle* Women Poets and the Sonnet,” which, rather like the sonnet, packs a great deal into short space. If the amatory sonnet sequences of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, both Rossettis, and George Meredith are best known today, these are unrepresentative Victorian examples according to Houston. Victorians typically sought to distance themselves from sonnets associated with unlawful passions and Continental origins, instead grounding English tradition in the sonnet as a medium of philosophical and meditative reflection. This critical focus, as well as debates over optimal stanzaic patterns, muted gender anxieties and, as amatory sonnets did not, gave women ready access to this culturally prestigious form. The sonnet also opened access to aestheticism, since the brief but intense aperçus of the sonnet were consistent with central tenets articulated by Walter Pater. Against this backdrop Houston examines clusters of sonnets on nature, art, and symbol by *fin-de-siècle* poets Mathilde Blind, Michael Field, and Rosamund Marriott Watson, demonstrating the means by which they obliquely reintroduced gender issues into the form. In “Boucher,” for example, Marriott Watson brings into question the painter’s empowered gaze upon female beauty by placing Boucher before his canvas of Venus as death creeps upon him, leaving the female spectacle in place but evacuating the male gaze directed toward it.

Patricia Pulham explores the relation of print culture to the female gaze in