

A Discussion on the Victorian Novel Canon and Underrepresented Sensation Women Novelists¹

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The Victorians are known as a novel-writing and novel-reading society, which makes it nearly impossible to judge the exact number of novels that were published in the period. The novel industry was central to many Victorian concerns: novel-writing was a way of making money for numerous middle-class writers and novel-reading functioned as a domestic entertainment. Also, many novels were written as a medium of reflecting social, political issues and novel was used as a way of influencing reading populations. This is perhaps why the range of novelists in the Victorian era can be astounding. Countless number of middle-class novelists wrote novels just to make ends meet. Yet, salient political figures such as Benjamin Disraeli, a Tory politician, a Member of Parliament and also the Prime Minister (1868), produced novels to shape the public opinion. In spite of this variety, only a handful of Victorian novelists secured a canonical status today while numerous others were pushed to oblivion. This caused a tendency to categorize Victorian novelists as major, classical, canonical or minor, non-canonical, underrepresented. Many novelists in the latter category were popular best-sellers of their time but they were neglected because of the flexible and changing nature of the literary canon. Especially sensation women novelists of the period suffered from this. Even though they were the best-sellers of the period, they were excluded from the publishing market and lost their readership in time. This article will thus discuss the fluctuating nature of the literary canon with a particular emphasis on the formation of the Victorian novel canon. Finally, the reasons of exclusion and resurrection of two Victorian best-seller women novelists will be exemplified: Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) and Ellen Wood (1814-1887).

Keywords: Literary Canon, Victorian Novel Canon, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood

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Many works in poetry, drama and prose found voice and recognition in the Victorian period but novel dominated the publishing industry. It is today a truism that the Victorian period was the golden age of the novel as a literary genre. This is possibly why the Victorians used novel writing for various reasons. Writing novels was a way of making money for many people and reading novels was the major entertainment for people from every walk of life. The Victorians were ardent novel-devourers, for which they are still famous. Novels in the Victorian period were also considered as vehicles of reflecting social problems, disciplining and controlling avid reading populations. This can explain why, in addition to the growing number of novelists, some politicians, too, ventured to write novels because they considered writing novels a quicker way of reaching public and influencing their opinions. Among the novel-writing politicians, for instance, Matthew Lewis (1775-1818), a Member of Parliament in the Georgian period and the writer of the famous Gothic novel *The Monk*, and Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), a Tory politician, a Member of Parliament and also the Prime Minister (1868), can be thought of as notable examples. Add to such political figures, one's next door neighbor could also turn a novel writer. Any literate person could be a novelist in the Victorian period and almost everyone was a novel reader. Still, only a handful of Victorian novelists secured canonical status today while an indefinite number of others, some of whom were best-sellers of their time, were pushed to oblivion.

The Victorian novelists are classified as major, classical, canonical or minor, non-canonical, underrepresented. One thing to note is that some novelists in the latter category were very well known in their time as popular best-seller writers. Yet, they were neglected later on due to the ever-changing dynamics of the canon formation. It would not be wrong to argue that mostly popular women novelists of the Victorian period suffered from the debates regarding canon formation. Thus, in this article, discussions considering the construction of the literary canon will be explained briefly, and then the establishment of the nineteenth century novel canon will be explicated. Finally, diversity and richness of non-canonical texts in the Victorian period will be accentuated with a special emphasis on two Victorian best-seller women novelists: Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) and Ellen Wood (1814-1887).

"The literary canon is a contentious concept," writes Jane Thomas (163). It is nearly impossible to fix the canonical works. Neither is it possible to name a single

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authority that can determine what constitutes the canon. In *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, the canon is defined as “an informal institution of literature whose specific inclusions and exclusions, deletions and exceptions are nowhere codified” (27). This makes canon formation a controversial process. Many criteria are constituted by diverse institutions to shape the literary canon, which are “the product of complex relationships between authorized literary, historical and cultural institutions, such as literature departments in universities and colleges, and publishers” (Thomas 163). The impact of educational institutions in determining what the literary canon can consist of is of paramount importance:

The form of the canon belongs to the process of the reproduction of social relations, but it does not enter this process immediately. The canon does not accrete over time like a pyramid built by invisible hands, nor does it act directly and irresistibly on social relations, like a chemical reagent; in its concrete form as a syllabus or curriculum, the canon is a discursive instrument of “transmission” situated historically within a specific institution of reproduction: the school. (Guillory 56)

Many scholars writing on the construction of the literary canon concur on the influence of various institutions that determine who reads what: “It is in the universities, in state cultural institutions, in publishing, in reviewing, in the awarding of literary prizes and in all branches of education that critical practices are established, reproduced and challenged” (Weedon 136). Canonical works are generally labeled as classics, and defining a classic is another tricky matter. The definition of a classic can explain why some works are considered canonical while some others are not. In his article “Why Read the Classics?” Italo Calvino itemizes a set of definitions to make clear the characteristics of ‘classics’ in literature. One aspect is repeated in all the items he enumerates, which is the fact that classics are often read more than once in one’s lifetime: “The classics are those books about which you usually hear people saying: ‘I’m rereading...’, never ‘I’m reading’” (3). John Mullan, in *How Novels Work*, offers a similar comment: “The obvious definition of a ‘classic’ (a label still important to publishers of fiction) is a book that readers keep rereading” (2). Also, in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to English Novelists*, Adrian Poole makes the same emphasis while explaining the criteria behind the selection of the twenty-seven writers that are included in the companion. Poole writes: “These twenty-seven writers are those whose work currently seems of most enduring value; they are those whom most readers now are likely to wish to reread and whom they should therefore read first” (10). At this point one should ask: what are the forces that make the reading public re-read some novels and not others? This can be explained by the popularity of the novel in the reading market. According to Jane Smiley, “the novel has a public life” and “[g]ossip about the novel . . . builds its desirability. After the first copies are distributed, it is virtually impossible for any authorities to stop their spread, and if a controversy enters the public mind, the desirability of the novel grows” (105). Thus, the more controversial a novel is, the more it may sell; yet still, being a best-seller does not guarantee a canonical status. Readers’ contribution to canon formation as demand makers cannot be underestimated, but it should be highlighted that readers’ choices can never be independent from the authorities in the field. Thus, what makes a literary work classic is a very complex issue and literary authorities (critics, specialists, and scholars),

editors of much consulted reference books, publishers, educational institutions and readers are influential agents in this process.

Defining the Victorian canon is an arduous task. Though it is hard to talk about a consensus about which names constitute the Victorian novel canon, the works by Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, William Thackeray, the Brontë Sisters (especially Charlotte and Emily), George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, are now considered the canonical novelists of the Victorian period. Various works by these novelists are frequently taught in educational institutions both at undergraduate and graduate levels. Although the canonical names recur in almost all taxonomies, there have been considerable changes in the Victorian novel canon over time.

Though she is not considered Victorian, starting with Jane Austen would be fair because she is one of the first names that one remembers speaking of the nineteenth century literary canon. Jane Austen is important also because she “is the earliest woman included in the canon of English literature” (Auerbach 10). In her article “Women and Fiction,” Virginia Woolf identifies “the four great women novelists” and Jane Austen leads the list. Other women novelists Woolf includes in her list are Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot (45). Neither Anne Brontë nor Elizabeth Gaskell is included in Woolf’s list. Lucy Poate Stebbins’ list of great women writers is astonishing. In her *A Victorian Album: Some Lady Novelists of the Period*, Stebbins writes that Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and finally, to the surprise of contemporary readers, Margaret Oliphant¹ constitute “the four great writers” of the Victorian age (viii).

A significant source regarding the discussions of the Victorian canon is F. R. Leavis’ *The Great Tradition*, first appeared in 1948. The book opens with the following premise: “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad” (9). Leavis discusses the last three in separate chapters as prominent English writers, but the first chapter, which shares the same title with the book, “The Great Tradition,” explores the changing dynamics of the Victorian canon. Leavis finishes the first chapter by accentuating the significant names according to him once again, but this time he includes D.H. Lawrence in his list as “the great genius” following Conrad (35). This is how Leavis concludes his list: “Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Conrad, and D. H. Lawrence: the great tradition of the English novel is there” (39). Leavis only includes two women novelists to his final list of remarkable English writers: Jane Austen and George Eliot. Still, he spares a brief note on the Brontës and surprisingly writes that Charlotte Brontë can be discussed in the minor Victorians list: “It is tempting to retort that there is only one Brontë. Actually,

¹ Margaret Oliphant was a Scottish Victorian, who was perhaps one of the most prolific women writers of the Victorian era. Today, Victorian specialists refer to her not only as a woman novelist but also as a notable literary critic, reviewer, essayist and biographer. In her long life-span, Oliphant produced over ninety novels of various genres, dozens of short stories, a considerable number of non-fiction works including literary criticism, biographies and her own autobiography. Also, she was a consistent contributor to the Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine between 1854 and 1897, until her death. Her Blackwood’s writings embraced short stories, serialised novels, reviews, literary criticism and diverse articles on the political and social agenda of the time. However, today her name is only known to specialists in the field.

Charlotte, though claiming no part in the great line of English fiction (it is significant that she couldn't see why any value should be attached to Jane Austen), has a permanent interest of a minor kind" (39). Leavis also includes Emily Brontë in the minor tradition, but still acknowledges her talent by noting that she was "the genius" of the Brontë sisters (39). He does not even mention Anne Brontë anywhere.

Walter Allen's work, *The English Novel: A Short Critical History*, is another crucial reference book to be consulted considering the fluctuating nature of the Victorian novel canon. Allen takes Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell as the most notable writers of the Victorian age (139). However, he adds, "they do not form a coherent body and Emily Brontë will prove an exception to all generalizations we care to make about the rest of them" (139). Differences in the categorizations of the canonical writers in various scholarly works prove that, as have been defined earlier, the canon was very unsteady and subjective. It is floating and cannot be fixed.

The Norton Anthology of English Literature (8th ed. 2006) includes five women in the section titled "The Victorian Age:" two poets; Elizabeth Barret Browning and Christina Rossetti, and three novelists; Elizabeth Gaskell, Emily Brontë, George Eliot. This time, Charlotte Brontë and Anne Brontë are excluded. All in all, Jane Austen, either Charlotte Brontë or Emily Brontë (or sometimes both), Elizabeth Gaskell, and definitely George Eliot are agreed classical women novelists of the period and they have a long established place in the Victorian canon.

One thing worth noting is that Anne Brontë, the youngest of the Brontë sisters, is a contested name considering the discussions of the Victorian novel canon. This is because in the twentieth century her reputation was still suffering from the overshadowing that her elder sister Charlotte started in the early 1850s, and it is with the 1970s feminist movement that her name is resurrected again along with some other women novelists that have been neglected for a long time. Thus although many critics before the 1970s did not include Anne Brontë in their list of canonical writers, John Sutherland acknowledges that "the Brontës comprise a writing family, three of whom rank as major Victorian novelists" (84).

The reasons why some names are indisputably canonical while the reception of others changes over time are much discussed. At this point one should recall the bestselling canonical writers as well as once-bestselling now non-canonicals ones. When the bestsellers of different periods and their changing canonical status are considered, the canon discussion gains another dimension: the distinction between serious literature and popular literature. The canonical writers who are thought to have produced serious literature generally become bestsellers of all times. Clive Bloom's study, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900*, covers bestselling books published after 1900, but in the first chapter titled "Origins, Problems and Philosophy of the Bestseller," Bloom offers critical observations regarding the bestselling canonical writers of the nineteenth century:

It is clear that Jane Austen's works sold many more copies in the twentieth century than in the whole of the nineteenth and certainly in her own lifetime; Dickens sells as many books now as during in his own lifetime and George Eliot still has a readership even if it might be largely academic. These writers remain

bestsellers, often outselling modern authors either because of their popularity (boosted by films television serializations, etc.) or because of special circumstances (being required school or college reading). (7)

The popular bestsellers which appeal more to the public taste cause intense debates among literary critics. Charles Dickens can be considered as the key male name in this discussion. Although Dickens is indisputably canonical today, he used to be a debatable figure. The reason was that he was a bestseller writer of his time and he was appealing to masses. Leavis does not include Dickens in what he calls “the great tradition,” in the English novel and he explains why: “That Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than his description suggests” (30). Allen, too, stresses the same point and writes that Dickens “was the great novelist who was also the great entertainer, the greatest entertainer, probably, in the history of fiction . . . he was a man of little education writing for a public often more poorly educated than himself” (159). While the canonical writers were thought to have produced serious literature, Dickens was meanwhile entertaining readers. Hence, discussions whether he was producing serious or popular literature caused confusions about his status as a novelist. Yet, Dickens is a unique case in this discussion because his canonical status is not even contested today. However, the prestige of many women novelists of the Victorian era suffered severely from the distinction between serious literature and popular literature. Many women novelists, whose publicity was not even questioned before, are now either lost altogether or neglected. Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood, celebrity sensation novelists of the 1860s, were among them.

As a touchstone work that reveals the plenitude and variety of Victorian women writers, *Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (2000) brings together ninety-three women writers, most of whose works are not even in print today. Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon are among those women writers. As reputed sensation novelists especially in the 1860s, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood were affected adversely by the distinction between the high culture and the low culture traditions, which can explain their subsequent overshadowing.

A voluminous novelist of her time, Ellen Wood is best known today with her sensation novel *East Lynne* (1861), even though she wrote many lengthy novels and dozens of short stories in her lifetime. Ellen Wood was very well known in the Victorian period, but she failed to get public attention in the twentieth century. Mary Elizabeth Braddon was even more famous than Ellen Wood. This is because both professional and personal life of Braddon aroused controversies throughout her life time. She had an extra-marital relationship with her publisher John Maxwell, who was already married to a woman entrapped in a madhouse. Braddon suffered from severe criticisms because of her personal life but she never lost her popularity and readership throughout the entire century. Particularly the 1860s were the heydays of her professional life as a famed novelist. She published well-sold novels such as *Three Times Dead* (1860), *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), *Aurora Floyd* (1863), *Eleanor's Victory* (1863), *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), all of which were devoured by Victorian readers.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood are fitting examples for once bestselling now underrepresented novelists, who suffered from the marginalization of popular fiction of the mid-Victorian period. Both Braddon and Wood's popularity was beyond question in the 1860s, a decade which witnessed what Andrew Radford calls "the sensation craze" (88). Marian Shaw notes that "*Lady Audley's Secret* was published in 1862 and reached its eighth edition in three months" (223). Sutherland also stresses the popularity of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and writes that she was the "queen of the circulating libraries and the most consistent of Victorian bestseller novelists" (80). Elen Wood was no less famous. Her *East Lynne* "was reprinted four times in three-decker form between 19 September 1861 and February 1862, merited a 5,000 run of the one-volume illustrated edition in 1862, and continued to sell well for the rest of the century" (Jay xxxviii). Regarding both novelists' popularity in the mid-Victorian period and their exclusion from the major Victorian writers, the explanations tend to stress the distinction between serious literature and popular literature:

[M]uch of the contemporary scholarship takes for granted the aesthetic distinction between high and low culture made by the Victorians. Many critics of the novel have implicitly or explicitly separated canonical authors, such as Richardson, Austen, Dickens, and Eliot, from the popular novels that influenced them and alongside of which their work was read, in the interest of constructing a high-culture novel tradition. Popular genres, such as the sensation novel, are consigned to second-rate status through a process that often replicates nineteenth-century discourses suspicious of working-class readers, female audiences, and affectively powerful or nonrealist literature. (Cvetkovich 15)

To explain the exclusion of once popular now neglected women writers from the Victorian novel canon, feminist scholars tend to discuss the dichotomy between serious literature and popular literature as a gendered issue. The strict distinction made between the serious novel and the popular novel, or, in other words, the high culture novel (the realist novel) and the low culture novel (romances, thrillers and sensation novels) is very important while determining the exclusion of countless Victorian women writers from the novel canon. These are gendered concepts because the former is generally associated with eminent male authors, who are now unarguably considered canonical while the latter is occupied by women writers, who lost their fame and readership in time. This is where the canon formation takes a gendered turn. The most important exceptions are Elizabeth Gaskell, who was writing social problem novels and secured her place in the high culture tradition and George Eliot, who was definitely in the high culture tradition, not only as a novelist but also as an intellectual of the time.

Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin's *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (1989) is an important study considering the distinction between serious literature and popular literature, and its influences on lost women writers of the late Victorian period. Tuchman and Fortin begin their study by asking the following critical questions: "Why does some literature supposedly transcend the ages and so constitute 'culture' while other once-popular books languish in disuse? Why and how does an occupation shift from having a preponderance of female practitioners to being performed mainly by men?" (1). Tuchman and Fortin's observation suggests that after the period of women's predominance in novel writing between 1840 and 1879, men took control of the field between 1880 and 1899, and redefined the notion of a

classic: “men of letters, including critics, actively redefined the nature of a good novel and a great author. They preferred a new form of realism that they associated with ‘manly’ literature—that is, great literature” (8). This resulted in the assumption that popular women’s writing of the time was associated with the low-culture novel, which explains why many women were excluded from the Victorian novel canon. Tuchman and Fortin further explain this with the empty-field phenomenon: “Applied to female-dominated white-collar occupations, the empty field phenomenon implies that when people realize that a job entails social or economic rewards, they may find it desirable” (4-5). When the centrality of the novel genre in the Victorian age is considered, it is understandable why novel writing was becoming a promising area. Consequently, outstanding number of women novelists who entered this empty-field caused the feminization of the field. According to Tuchman and Fortin’s argument, this resulted in the emergence of the distinction between the high culture novel and the low culture novel and the latter was associated with womanly writing while the former was considered manly. Hence, countless notable women novelists of the Victorian age, including Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon lost their popularity in time.

The writers of realist fiction also contributed to the marginalization of the writers of popular best sellers. Women novelists who wrote domestic novels looked down on especially women sensation and romance writers. George Eliot and Margaret Oliphant can be noted as two very well-known critics in this regard. For instance, in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” (1856) George Eliot mocks the common features of the popular novels written by women. She criticizes the clichés of representation and recurring themes in what she teasingly calls “Silly Novels.” In the same vein, in two of her articles titled “Sensation Novels,” (1862) and “Novels” (1867), Margaret Oliphant harshly criticizes women sensation novelists and accuses them of presenting immoral and thus unreal women characters. Apparently, women’s criticism of other women also contributed to the overshadowing of once very popular novelists.

Still, this hierarchical categorization of Victorian novels was reversed by the new feminist interest in the popular fiction of the Victorian era. The Anglo-American feminist movement of the 1970s had a great influence on the resurrection of neglected works by many women novelists, who were mostly the sensation writers:

Since the early 1970s we have witnessed a veritable explosion of interest in women writers

across centuries and cultures. Women’s texts have been recovered, women’s writing has found a publisher’s market, courses in women’s literature have been created, and some might even argue that curricula are beginning to be transformed by the inclusion of women writers.

(Langland 92)

Thanks to repercussions of the feminist movement in academia, neglected novels by underrepresented women writers were began to be great interests for specialists in the field, if not yet for common readers. According to Ruth Robbins, “the difference it has made is immeasurable, leading to a radical reformation of the curriculum and, in the 1980s, to a revolution in publishing as the expanded canon required the support of good editions of the ‘new’ books for students to read” (210). For example, The Virago Press,

which published works by neglected women writers of the past centuries, offered an important contribution in this respect:

The first Virago Modern Classic, *Frost in May* by Antonia White, was published in 1978. It launched a list dedicated to the celebration of women writers and to the rediscovery and reprinting of their works. Its aim was, and is, to demonstrate the existence of a female tradition in fiction, and to broaden the sometimes narrow definition of a 'classic' which has often led to the neglect of interesting novels and short stories. Published with new introductions by some of today's best writers, the books are chosen for many reasons: they may be great works of fiction; they may be wonderful period pieces; they may reveal particular aspects of women's lives; they may be classics of comedy or storytelling. (n.p)

In her *Working With Feminist Criticism*, Mary Eagleton writes that Virago and the Women's Press are first remembered in Britain as feminist publishing houses (105). However, she adds, "in 1993 the Women's Research and Resource Centre in London recorded twenty-one feminist publishing houses" (105). This made available many texts by women novelists to contemporary readers and resurrected feminist academic interest in the underrepresented novels.

This interest also triggered an attempt to change the Western canon: "If critics from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had set in motion the establishment of a canon of Victorian women's writing, then the feminist critiques of the last three decades of the twentieth century began to consolidate it" (Boardman and Jones 6). This is mainly because "feminist literary criticism quickly identified the male-dominated character of the Western canon and proceeded to challenge its selection procedures," ("Canon," *A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory* 22) as it was thought that the patriarchal nature of the literary canon "has chosen so few women writers as major figures and it has relegated so many women to obscurity" ("Canon," *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* 29).

If not all, some works by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood survived thanks to the feminist publishing project. Today, they are considered prominent novelists in the genre of the sensation novel. For instance, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, along with Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, is considered as a "canonical sensation text" (Harrison and Fantina xi). Her best known novels *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* are regarded as "the alternative canons of female-authored literature" (Pykett 277). One thing worth noting is that though Braddon was one of the most prolific novelists of her time, her other works are not much known today. Ellen Wood is still less recognized than Braddon, albeit she receives some recognition from the experts in the field:

By the end of the century, Wood's readership was diminishing, and many of her books were no longer in print. This trend continued for several decades, until both fiction by Wood and essays about her were rarities. In the last three decades, however, interest in feminist criticism and sensation fiction has revived *East Lynne* from obscurity. (Grose 413)

This article contends that studying once popular now underrepresented novelists such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood and countless others will undermine the

authority of the former scholarship, which prioritizes only canonical novelists and their works. Starting from the 1980s, neglected Victorian novels, which were once very well known both to readers and critics, were re-printed and began to be read and taught in Western higher institutions, especially in the States. This is a significant contribution of the Anglo-American feminism to the English studies particularly in the American higher institutions. Still, it may not be wrong to claim that Victorian studies in Turkey is limited to reading and teaching a handful of canonical works as required readings both at undergraduate and graduate levels. Considering the abundance and diversity of Victorian novels, variety of sub-genres, ever-changing literary trends, reading and studying the leading names is not enough to have a comprehensive understanding of the novel industry in the Victorian period. Though feminist publishing houses such as Virago Press, Pandora Press, The Feminist Press and The Women's Press, and the like have shown a great effort in re-printing and circulation of novels by neglected women writers, many works by countless women are still in oblivion. Whether the Victorian canon will be enlarged in time including the still neglected women novelists is difficult to predict. Yet, both feminist studies and Victorian studies should urge concentrations on the unjustly underrepresented literary texts by women, which would unearth the diversity of women's voices of the past centuries.

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