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Becoming a professional writer

Neither necessity, nor the unsatisfied solitude of a single life, nor, as I fancy, an irresistible impulse, threw her into the paths of literature. She wrote, as the birds sing, because she liked to write; and ceased writing when the fancy left her.

David Masson's obituary for Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–65), published shortly after her death in November 1865, struck a note that was echoed in other tributes. Gaskell had written, he suggested, not because she needed to earn her living or to fill a gap in her life, but because she enjoyed writing. That alone drove her creativity. Her works, he went, on possessed "a degree of perfection and completeness rare in these days, when successful authoresses pour out volume after volume without pause or waiting."¹

Writing in 1865, Masson's "successful authoresses" could have referred to any number of women writers, but probably included Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835–1915) and Ellen Wood (1814–87), both of whom were then celebrated as writers of "sensation" novels, and who were producing fiction at a prodigious rate. Other possibilities include Dinah Maria Craik (1826–87), Margaret Oliphant (1828–97), and Eliza Meteyard (1816–79), whose rates of publication in the 1860s were steady rather than relentless, but who had each achieved public recognition.

Masson was careful to make a distinction between Gaskell's "complete" and "perfect" works, which were not produced by financial exigency, and those of her contemporaries, which he believed were. His use of the feminine "authoress" acknowledged their presence in the marketplace but implied a secondary status, which was also his point. Whether he thought of the successful authoresses as professionals because they earned a living and Gaskell as a gifted amateur by contrast is not clear. The mid-nineteenth-century's perception of what constituted a professional writer and women writers' increasing sense of their own professionalism are in part the subjects of this chapter.

Debates about the need for appropriate work for women, and middle-class women in particular, proliferated from the 1850s onward. Writing in the same year as Masson's obituary, the feminist and journalist Bessie Rayner Parkes argued passionately for a range of new professions

for women who needed to support themselves. In her *Essays on Woman's Work* (1865), she acknowledged that literature already *was* a profession in which women had made their mark, particularly in the periodical press:

As periodicals have waxed numerous so has female authorship waxed strong. The magazines demanded short graphic papers, observation, wit, and moderate learning,—women demanded work such as they could perform at home, and ready pay upon performance; the two wants met, and the female sex has become a very important element in the fourth estate. If editors were ever known to disclose the dread secrets of their dens, they only could give the public an idea of the authoresses whose unsigned names are Legion; of their rolls of manuscripts, which are as the sands of the sea.²

Women writers' contributions to the periodical press, she suggested, were indicative of a stage in their development, a process that eventually led to full professional status and recognition in a range of genres and subjects.

Writing for the periodical press conferred status and respectability, as the journalist G. H. Lewes declared in an influential article in 1847.³ It also encouraged variety and experiment. Writers of both sexes seized opportunities to write reviews and articles, thereby extending their repertoire, and at the same time securing an income or augmenting an existing one. This extended repertoire was, in part, what made them "professional" in the eyes of their contemporaries. By virtue of the range and variety of their literary production, they also qualified for the term "woman of letters," one that Linda Peterson has shown came into use in the later nineteenth century as men and women writers sought personal and collective status as authors.⁴ In what follows, I propose to examine three nineteenth-century women writers whose careers spanned the 1840s through to the 1890s, each of whom regarded herself as a professional writer even if she did not use the term.

Eliza Meteyard (1816–79) was the Liverpool-born daughter of an army surgeon who grew up in Shropshire. Early in her life, she assumed responsibility for her siblings and moved to London in the 1840s to establish herself as a writer. Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–65) was born into a comfortable, well-connected Cheshire family with Unitarian affiliations; she spent her adult life in Manchester, the wife of a Unitarian minister and mother of four daughters. Margaret Oliphant (1828–97), born in Wallyford, near Edinburgh, grew up in Liverpool and Birkenhead, the daughter of a clerk in the Customs House. She moved to London in 1852 following her marriage to a stained-glass designer. Widowed at the age of thirty-one, she supported her two sons and later several of her close relations by her writing.

These three women were of the same writing generation, although eighteen years separated the oldest, Gaskell, from the youngest, Oliphant. They achieved success and recognition at different stages in their careers. Meteyard and Oliphant wrote, in Masson's phrase, "of necessity," to support themselves and their dependents. Money mattered to Gaskell as well, but her earnings contributed to the family budget and purchased luxuries such as holidays, rather than constituting the only source of income.

All three women took advantage of the periodical press. One of those advantages, as Parkes emphasized, was anonymity, which until the 1860s remained the norm in most publications. Another was the opportunity to work from home, which in the case of Gaskell and Oliphant was imperative, given their domestic responsibilities. For writers of both sexes, living in London, or within easy reach of it, was an advantage. A London base proved a key factor in the development of Meteyard's career. It was less important to Gaskell, who overcame the disadvantage of living in a provincial city by her instinctive sociability and a penchant as well as the means for travel. Oliphant's career was less dependent on metropolitan contacts, although she lived in London until 1865 and then settled in Windsor, within reach of the capital.

Women writers had fewer opportunities than their male colleagues to participate in the interlocking networks of writers, publishers, editors, and proprietors that operated in London. Publishers' offices became meeting places for writers, and the wheels of literary London were oiled by publishers' dinners and soirées from which women were largely excluded, as they were from the various literary clubs that sprang up in the 1840s.⁵ Networks that included women writers existed, nevertheless, from the 1830s onward. Eliza Meteyard was part of a circle of radical Unitarians emanating from W. J. Fox's South Place Chapel at Finsbury.⁶ Through William and Mary Howitt, the proprietors of *Howitt's Journal* who were on the fringes of this circle, she was introduced to a group of editors and writers with liberal sympathies that included Douglas Jerrold, editor of *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine* and *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*. Possibly also through the Howitts, she met Christian Johnstone, editor of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* and like Mary Howitt an active patron of women writers. It was through Mary Howitt that she met Eliza Cook, who in 1849 launched *Eliza Cook's Journal*, which became Meteyard's next periodical outlet. And so her literary career, precarious as it proved to be, was launched.

The Howitts proved influential patrons for Elizabeth Gaskell as well as Meteyard.⁷ It was through them that her first novel *Mary Barton* (1848) was placed with the publishers Chapman and Hall. That connection led to an introduction to Dickens, which in turn prompted an invitation to contribute

to his new weekly magazine *Household Words* in 1850. These early contacts were crucial to Gaskell's career.

By her own admission Margaret Oliphant was not a good networker. Her most important contact, with the firm of William Blackwood and Sons, was made before she moved to London. She became, in her words, the Blackwoods' "general utility woman," contributing "miscellaneous papers," as she and John Blackwood referred to them, to *Blackwood's Magazine* on a regular basis from 1854 until her death in 1897.⁸ It was a role she accepted gratefully, one that provided a steady income when she most needed it.

Meteyard, Gaskell, and Oliphant entered the literary marketplace within ten years of one another, between 1838 and 1849. In each case, the early contacts made and the contracts secured played a vital part in their professional writing lives and influenced the outcomes as much as their innate abilities.

Eliza Meteyard

Eliza Meteyard's radical political beliefs shaped her early writing and were in turn shaped by her various personal associations. Much of her writing career was dependent on the periodical press. She published a series of novels, beginning with *Struggles for Fame* (1845), which was previewed as "Scenes in the Life of an Authoress" in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (1843–44).⁹ Few of her novels made a positive impact, either on the reading public or on the critics. Consequently, she relied on the press to keep afloat financially. The periodicals for which she wrote in the 1840s, *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*, *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, *Howitt's Journal* and its precursor the *People's Journal*, paid little. Most of them were short lived. In the 1850s, she wrote for, among others, *Eliza Cook's Journal*, *Sharpe's London Magazine*, and *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, all of which were aimed at an artisan and lower-middle-class readership similar to *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine* and *Howitt's Journal*. Despite her productivity, she was forced to apply to the Royal Literary Fund for financial assistance on five separate occasions, the first as early as 1851.¹⁰

The subject matter of Meteyard's stories and articles, which reflected the journals' concerns as much as her own, included the cooperative movement, the regulation of working hours in shops and offices, women's employment, women's education, temperance, prostitution, reform of the poor laws, and women's rights. She was one of the first women to serve on the council of the Whittington Club, a project promoted by Jerrold and others to provide the benefits of a London gentlemen's club for shopmen and office workers of both sexes: meeting rooms, a library, and dining facilities. In "The

Whittington Club and the Ladies” in *Douglas Jerrold’s Weekly Newspaper* (October 24, 1846), she celebrated the “liberal spirit” that promoted equality of the sexes within the club. Writing as “Silverpen,” a pseudonym suggested by Jerrold, and with her gender scarcely concealed, she noted: “Necessity now enforces woman to earn her bread (and we think happily) by what were once considered the masculine prerogatives of the pen, the pencil, or the voice” (343). Women writers’ full participation in the facilities of the club, particularly the library and meeting rooms, would have the same humanizing effect as their presence in the reading room of the British Museum. It would enable them to participate in the reforming agenda of the age as intellectual equals. Women writers, the article implied, were acquiring an increasingly public role and voice.

Writers and publishers appear in Meteyard’s fiction in both major and minor roles. Barbara, the author heroine of *Struggles for Fame*, is an orphan who after brutal treatment in early life and many improbable adventures is befriended by Adam Leafdale, a kindly book dealer by whom she is educated. Leafdale advocates the importance of “eating the bread of independence” (vol. 2, chap. 1). At the end of the novel, when her fortunes have gone through three volumes’ worth of peaks and troughs, Barbara has to choose between an advantageous marriage and her writing; she sacrifices the former for the latter. “Miss Byron,” the silver-fork novelist in “Time versus Malthus” (*Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine* 1846, vol. 3, no. 17) is rescued from her lonely life by marriage to “the moralist,” a reformed Malthusian who now endorses parenthood. “The Works of John Ironshaft” (*Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine*, 1847, vol. 6, no. 35) is the story of a self-educated working man who rises to become a nationally famed industrialist and philanthropist. A writer with an “iron pen” as well as a blacksmith, he seeks out a London publisher, “Mr Proof,” who condescends and then dismisses his efforts while his underling fawns over “her ladyship,” a fashionable novelist. At the end of his life, Ironshaft is celebrated, not only for his success as an industrialist but for his other “Works,” which have influenced the lives of working people for the better.¹¹ None of the author subjects is transparently a self-portrait, but many of them show the price, in terms of drudgery and exploitation, of pursuing a literary career.

The transition to a more stable professional status came in the 1860s when Meteyard seized an opportunity to write the biography of Josiah Wedgwood, the famous Staffordshire potter. The raw materials for the biography had been acquired by her friend Joseph Mayer, who was unable to carry out the project. Mary Howitt claimed to have been instrumental in securing a thousand pound advance for the biography from the publishers Hurst & Blackett,¹² but the end product, the two-volume *Life of Josiah Wedgwood*

from his private correspondence and family papers (1865–66), was a triumph for Meteyard alone. She found her subject, a man of talent and abilities who had risen from humble origins by his own exertions, immensely sympathetic. He was a real-life version of the heroes of several of her stories. The biography demonstrated her command of a wide range of source materials and her ability to write not only a compelling narrative but also an authoritative history of pottery making.

Yet success, when it came, was short lived. Despite the popularity of the biography, Meteyard's financial position seems never to have been secure. In 1869, Gladstone's government awarded her a Civil List pension of £100. Her reputation quickly waned after her death in 1879. Meteyard was eminently qualified for the title of a "woman of letters" by her competence in many genres: novels, short stories, biography, history, and children's books as well as her extensive journalism. The *Dictionary of National Biography* designates her as an "author," an acknowledgment of her professional status and the range of her writing. What the entry does not convey is the uphill struggle her professional writing life had been. Like her heroine Barbara in *Struggles for Fame*, she had "eaten the bread of independence," but it had proved a meager diet, bringing neither lasting success nor financial security.

Elizabeth Gaskell

The publication of Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), brought a mixed response from readers and reviewers, but in terms of her professional writing life it opened new doors and established her securely in the literary marketplace. From 1849 onward, she was in receipt of invitations from the editors and proprietors of weekly and monthly magazines directed at a wide spectrum of readers. Dickens's fulsome invitation to write for *Household Words* in 1850 – "I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist, in preference to the authoress of *Mary Barton*"¹³ – was undoubtedly the most flattering, but it was preceded and followed by a stream of similar solicitations from other editors.

Through Mary Howitt, she was introduced to John Sartain, the proprietor of *Sartain's Union Magazine*, an illustrated monthly published in Philadelphia, to which she contributed her stories "The Last Generation in England" (July 1849) and "Martha Preston" (July 1850), the latter later expanded into "Half a Life-time Ago" (*Household Words*, October 6–20, 1855). It was probably also through Mary Howitt that she was introduced to Eliza Cook, who urged her to contribute to her newly established *Eliza Cook's Journal*, an invitation she did not accept. William and Robert Chambers were reported to be in pursuit of the author of *Mary Barton* as a

potential contributor to *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, although there is no record of her having written for their weekly. An approach in 1853 by the novelist Fanny Mayne, the editor of the *True Briton*, was politely refused.¹⁴

The steady flow of invitations must have been encouraging to a young writer who was only just finding her way into metropolitan literary circles. Gaskell's choice of publishing outlets was seemingly fortuitous, although initially she inclined to publications with a wide range of readers rather than more elite journals intended for the educated reading public. The invitation to write for *Household Words* was an opportunity to be grasped, and she did so; her three-part story "Lizzie Leigh" followed Dickens's "A Preliminary Word" in the opening number of March 30, 1850. *Cranford*, one of her best-known works, began as a sketch in *Household Words* and grew into a nine-part series (1851–53), republished in volume format in 1853. Her novel *North and South*, which, like *Mary Barton*, tackled the tensions between working people and their employers in mid-century Manchester, was serialized in weekly parts in *Household Words* in 1854, following Dickens's own *Hard Times*. Despite an at times fraught relationship with its hands-on "Conductor," as Dickens called himself, she wrote for *Household Words* until it came to an end in 1858 and continued to write for the "new Dickensy periodical,"¹⁵ as she described *All the Year Round*, which succeeded it.

Gaskell's commitment to mass-market journalism, or at least a desire for her stories to reach as wide a readership as possible, is emphasized by her willingness to write two stories, "Hand and Heart" and "Bessy's Troubles at Home," for her friend Travers Madge's *Sunday School Penny Magazine* in 1849 and 1852 and to allow her story "Christmas Storms and Sunshine" (1848) to be reprinted in the penny weekly *Christian Socialist* in 1851.¹⁶

Elizabeth Haldane, one of her early twentieth-century biographers, lamented that Gaskell's "journalism" had been an error of judgment, and that had she resisted contributing short stories and articles to periodicals, she would have had more time to write the full-length novels on which her reputation rested.¹⁷ This judgment, it could be argued, misinterprets Gaskell's view of her writing life. At no point did she demonstrate the single-mindedness of George Eliot, who determined to forgo reviewing and concentrate on writing novels once *Scenes of Clerical Life* became successful.¹⁸ To the contrary, Gaskell seemed to thrive on a mixture of short-term projects such as stories and articles that ran alongside more ambitious book projects, no doubt attracted by the extra income they provided. Angus Easson notes that when she was at her busiest and most preoccupied, notably at the height of the furor surrounding the publication of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1857, she was nevertheless willing to undertake some well-paid literary chores. On that occasion, she agreed to contribute a preface to an English

edition of *Mabel Vaughan* (1857), a little-known novel by the American novelist Maria S. Cummins, and a short story in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.¹⁹

One aspect of Gaskell's work that attests to her professionalism and adds to an understanding of the range of her talents is her book reviewing. Her anonymous review of Longfellow's long poem *The Golden Legend* (1850) was the lead review in the *Athenaeum* for December 13, 1851. A brief notice of Margaret Sandbach née Roscoe's novel *Spiritual Alchemy* (1849) appeared in the "New Novels" section of the same issue.²⁰ Like many writers, she found that the process of reviewing the works of others acted as a stimulus to her own writing and provided an opportunity to reflect on her own creative process. The cross-fertilization between her well-judged and knowledgeable review of Longfellow's poem and the plot of her novel *Ruth* (1853), on which she was working at the same time, is clear. Both contain a weak hero, an innocent heroine, and a story that turns on, among other things, whether the heroine can be saved by marriage and whether she lives or dies. In her notice of Sandbach's *Spiritual Alchemy*, Gaskell commented on "the folly exhibited by many an author of a moderately successful novel who hurries forward a second on the reputation of the first,"²¹ a possible reflection of her own anxiety about laying herself open to another onslaught from the critics, this time with a controversial story of a working-class woman seduced and betrayed by an upper-class lover.

One unexpected outlet for her reviewing talents was *Household Words*, in which on two occasions she chose a book around which to weave one of her characteristically inventive articles. "Modern Greek Songs" (February 25, 1854) was ostensibly a review of Jean Claude Fauriel's *Chants Populaires de la Grèce Moderne* (1824–25). The prompt for "Company Manners" (May 20, 1854) was an article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* on Madame de Sablé (1599–1678), the eminent seventeenth-century salon hostess, by the French philosopher Victor Cousin, which was later published as a book. In the *Household Words* tradition, her deftly pitched review-essays combined information and serious thought with entertainment without making unrealistic assumptions about what her readers may have read.

Gaskell's last known book review, of W. T. M. Torrens's *Lancashire's Lesson; or the Need of a Settled Policy in Times of Exceptional Distress* (1864), was written for Alexander Macmillan's weekly review the *Reader* (March 25, 1865) at the same time as her last and most ambitious novel *Wives and Daughters* (1866) was being serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine*. The review demonstrates an ability to enter the political fray and to argue her case with a toughness and precision she had not shown until then. The issues raised in her review are those she had articulated in *Mary Barton* and *North*

and South – the dignity of workers and the responsibility of employers and now of the state to provide employment for those thrown out of work by causes beyond their control, in this instance, the Lancashire cotton famine of 1862, an indirect consequence of the U.S. Civil War.

As well as demonstrating a new dimension to Gaskell's talents and competencies, her book reviews endorse the point that she was a professional woman of letters in the Victorian mold, writing across many genres – novels, biography, poems, short stories, articles, and reviews – and contributing to a range of publications from penny and two-penny weeklies to literary weeklies such as the *Athenaeum* and the *Reader* and middle-class magazines such as *Fraser's* and the *Cornhill*. She had no hierarchy of publishing outlets but responded to invitations and opportunities as they arose. She was an assiduous “book maker,” collecting her short stories and articles into volumes at regular intervals. She planned another biography – of Madame de Sévigné, the celebrated seventeenth-century French intellectual and letter writer – which was not completed. Professor A. W. Ward, who wrote her entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, designated her a novelist, a designation he later reinforced by the structure of his 1906 Knutsford edition of her works, which omitted the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and consisted of eight volumes of her five full-length novels and three novellas. The memorializing of Elizabeth Gaskell by her obituarists and her early editors and biographers seriously obscured the range of her literary production and her many professional talents, which are only now being fully acknowledged.

Margaret Oliphant

“I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children,” Margaret Oliphant wrote candidly in her fragmentary autobiography in 1885. She went on:

When people comment on the number of books I have written, and I say that I am so far from being proud of that fact that I should like at least half of them forgotten, they stare—and yet it is quite true . . . They are my work, which I like in the doing, which is my natural way of occupying myself, which are never so good as I meant them to be.²²

One of the attractive features of Oliphant's *Autobiography* is the honesty of her self-assessment and the complex tension between her insistence that she had to write to support her family set against her obvious pleasure in her work, the way her writing structured and gave meaning to her life. The writing, as she says at one point, “ran through everything.”²³ Also running

through the *Autobiography* is the question whether, if she had written less, if she had not felt pressured to write incessantly to support her family, she might have done better work, written “a fine novel” as she calls it, and have earned “nearly as much for half the production.”²⁴ It was a question she could not resolve.

The anxiety of overproduction was not Oliphant’s alone – it haunted many writers of both sexes in the second half of the nineteenth century, enabled and encouraged as they were by a diversified literary market to earn a reasonable living, driven by personal circumstances, anxious too about their legacy, and as the century progressed, pursued by a celebrity culture. For Oliphant, however, the sense of being driven to write and an awareness of the consequences seem to have been borne in on her at an early stage. Recalling a happy time in the 1850s when she and her husband were just making ends meet, she wrote, “I was, of course, writing steadily all the time, getting about £400 for a novel, and already, of course, being told that I was working too fast and producing too much.”²⁵ An anonymous review of her novel *The Quiet Heart* (1854) in the *Athenaeum* echoed this perception, noting the similarities between the novel and its predecessor: “the author seems to have written herself quite out, for the present at least.”²⁶ The shrewd reviewer – it was Geraldine Jewsbury – had put her finger on an issue that would characterize Oliphant’s entire career.

Oliphant was in no doubt that she was a professional writer. Recalling her various workplaces, from the family dining room to the back sitting room in the houses in Harrington Square and Ulster Place, she noted that the first time she had ever secluded herself for her work was “years after it had become my profession and sole dependence.”²⁷ Like many writers of her generation, she had several projects on the go at once and secured multiple contracts with publishers. Henry Blackett of the firm Hurst & Blackett, who published her books from 1853 onward, became a friend as well as a professional colleague. Alexander Macmillan, with whom she initiated her first contract in 1859, regularly received requests for advances on books still to be written, as did John Blackwood, for whom she then worked off her debt.

As betokened her professionalism, the reviews and articles for *Blackwood’s Magazine* ran in tandem with her novels, biographies, literary histories, and whatever else she was contracted for. The early reviews focused primarily on contemporary fiction, but she also reviewed poetry, history, biography, books of travel, and occasionally books on art and theology. Her “miscellaneous pieces” included articles on the Scottish church, accounts of her travels at home and abroad, and reviews of current exhibitions. She wrote on issues affecting women, including divorce and later the vote, some of her views disquieting to a modern sensibility, although

these were moderated toward the end of her life. She became sufficiently fluent in French and Italian to review books in both languages, concentrating on contemporary literature and culture. German, too, she tackled although less easily.

Regular reviewing provided an income stream, but she was also energized by it. Her voracious reading of the works of others fed her own creativity, often in direct ways. Her reviews of two novels by F. W. Robinson, a little-known novelist, influenced the plot and characters of *The Perpetual Curate*, one of the acclaimed “Chronicles of Carlingford.”²⁸ Critics have suggested that the research and writing of her biography of the Scottish preacher Edward Irving (1862) fueled an interest in a religious vocation that found its way into several of the Carlingford novels.²⁹ So many of her articles were biographical sketches that one could also see her journalism at this point as a training ground for the full-scale biographies she later wrote. But it would be wrong to see Oliphant’s reviewing as an apprenticeship for something else. Her critical judgments in these early years were sure footed. She could be opinionated, wrong headed at times, but she was also perceptive and shrewd. If she was in training for anything in these reviews, it was to become the influential critical voice of her generation, an achievement signaled by her obituarists – memorably in Henry James’s double-edged comment that “no woman had ever, for half a century, had her personal ‘say’ so publicly and irresponsibly.”³⁰

Oliphant constantly sought larger projects that would provide a steady income rather than the hand-to-mouth existence of article writing. Blackwood proposed a series of biographical sketches of eighteenth-century figures that became *Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II*, serialized first in *Blackwood’s* and then published in two volumes in 1869. Other series followed in the magazine, but disappointingly none turned into books. In 1876, Blackwood proposed that she edit a book series, “Foreign Classics for English Readers,” to which she contributed three volumes herself.

David Finkelstein, the modern historian of the House of Blackwood, notes that from 1870 onward, the firm began to move away from three-volume novels to concentrate on biography, general history, and books of travel. After 1870, Blackwood published only seven of Oliphant’s remaining novels. Instead, she was contracted by them for biographies, for short stories, and eventually for *Annals of a Publishing House* (1897), the official history of the firm, all of which made a profit. For her novels after 1870, she turned to Macmillan; to Hurst & Blackett; and to periodicals such as *Good Words*, the *Cornhill*, the *Graphic*, *St Paul’s Magazine*, and *Longman’s Magazine*; and to Tillotson’s fiction agency through which her novels were serialized in newspapers.

In the late 1880s, Oliphant attempted to adapt to new journalistic practices with columns of short articles on topical subjects, including social and political concerns. The titles, “A Fireside Commentary” in the daily *St James’s Gazette* (1888), “A Commentary from an Easy Chair” in the weekly *Spectator* (1889–90), and “Things in General” in the monthly *Atalanta* (1893–94), convey the more relaxed tone and fluid format of the new ventures. They were only moderately successful. Her work for *Blackwood’s Magazine* continued, as did the steady stream of novels, some from 1894 adopting a one-volume format in the wake of the demise of the circulating libraries. “I am a wonder to myself, a sort of machine so little out of order, able to endure all things, always fit for work whatever has happened to me,” she wrote in 1890 at the age of sixty-two.³¹ She became increasingly conscious, though, that newer writers were overtaking her and, in the analogy she used in a poignant preface to a collection of stories, aware that her career was on its “ebb tide.”³²

Oliphant’s reflection on Trollope’s career in her obituary for the novelist might have served as a justification for her own writing life:

It would be vain to calculate what Mr Trollope might have done had he . . . left us only the half-dozen stories which embody the History of Basset . . . Our own opinion is that every artist finds the natural conditions of his working, and that in doing what he has to do according to his natural lights he is doing the best which can be got from him. But it is hopeless to expect from the reader either the same attention or the same faith for twenty or thirty literary productions which he gives to four or five. The instinct of nature is against the prolific worker. In this way a short life, a limited period of activity are much the best for art; and a long period of labour, occupied by an active mind and fertile faculties, tell against, and not for, the writer.³³

Her reflection might also have served as an epitaph for many professional women writers, driven by necessity and perhaps urged on by the need to keep their name before the public, into writing too quickly and producing too much.

Conclusion

After their deaths, Meteyard, Gaskell, and Oliphant suffered the sharp decline in their reputations common to many Victorian writers at the turn of the twentieth century. By any objective measure, Meteyard’s was the least successful career of the three. Her writing life, with its unremitting struggle to earn an adequate living, was more common in the nineteenth century than has been acknowledged.³⁴ In her obituaries, Gaskell was routinely compared

with her more famous writing sisters, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot, to her disadvantage. It was Margaret Oliphant who in 1887 declared that “Mrs Gaskell has fallen into that respectful oblivion which is the fate of a writer who reaches a sort of secondary classical rank and survives, but not effectually, as the greater classics do.”³⁵ Oliphant’s obituarists respectfully acknowledged her achievements across a wide range of publications including the novel and her impact as a critic, but there was a general sense that she had outlived her time. The writing lives of all three confirm Parkes’s sense that by 1865, literature had become an acknowledged profession for women. But the collective experience of these three women of letters also demonstrates that it remained a precarious one, that success, when it came, could be short lived, and that the judgment of posterity could be harsh.

NOTES

1. [David Masson], “Mrs Gaskell,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 13 (December 1865), 154.
2. Bessie Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman’s Work* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1865), p. 120.
3. [G. H. Lewes], “The Condition of Authors in England, Germany and France,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 35 (March 1847), 285–95.
4. Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters. Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); see Introduction and chap. 1.
5. See Joanne Shattock, “Professional Networks: Masculine and Feminine,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 44:2 (Summer 2011), 128–40.
6. See Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement, 1831–1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).
7. See Easley, “Making a Debut,” pp. 15–28 in this volume, for details of this connection.
8. Mrs. Oliphant, *Annals of a Publishing House. William Blackwood and his Sons* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1895), vol. 2, p. 475.
9. “Scenes in the Life of an Authoress,” *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* 99 (December 1843), 765–75; (January 1844), 36–42; and (April 1844), 245–54. These were extracts from the first volume of the novel, not a full serialization.
10. Kay Boardman, “Struggling for Fame: Eliza Meteyard’s Principled Career,” in *Popular Victorian Women Writers*, ed. Kay Boardman and Shirley Jones (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 48.
11. I am grateful to Tomoko Kanda for directing me to this story.
12. See *Mary Howitt. An Autobiography*, ed. Margaret Howitt (London: Wm. Isbister, 1889), vol. 2, p. 149.
13. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), vol. 6 (1850–52), p. 22.

14. *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. John Chapple and Alan Shelston (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, 2003), pp. 106–7.
15. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (1966; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 538.
16. *Christian Socialist*, March 29, April 5 and 12, 1851, vol. 1, pp. 175–76, 183–84, 191–92.
17. Elizabeth Haldane, *Mrs Gaskell and her Friends* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), pp. 5, 208.
18. Joanne Shattock, “Publishing and Publication,” in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 15.
19. Angus Easson, “An Incident at Niagara Falls’ and the Editing of Mabel Vaughan,” *English Language Notes* 17:4 (June 1980), 273–77.
20. Angus Easson, “Elizabeth Gaskell and the Athenaeum: Two Contributions Identified,” *Modern Language Review* 85:4 (October 1990), 829–32.
21. “Reviews in the Athenaeum,” *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, vol. 1, ed. Joanne Shattock (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p. 216.
22. *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 14–15.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
26. [Geraldine Jewsbury], *Athenaeum*, November 23, 1854, p. 1577. I am grateful to Isabel Seidel for bringing this review to my attention.
27. *Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p. 31.
28. Wilkie Collins’s *No Name* similarly had an indirect influence on the plot. See Joanne Shattock, ed., “Introduction,” *The Perpetual Curate*, in *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), vol. 17, pp. xvi–xix.
29. Trev Lynn Broughton, ed., “Introduction,” *Writings on Biography*, in *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), vol. 7, pp. xiii–xviii.
30. Henry James, “London Notes, August 1897,” in *Notes on Novelists* (London: Charles Scribner, 1914), pp. 357–60.
31. *Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p. 56.
32. Margaret Oliphant, “On the Ebb Tide,” preface to *The Ways of Life* (London: Smith, Elder, 1897).
33. “Anthony Trollope,” *Good Words*, 1883; rpt. in *Literary Criticism, 1877–86*, ed. Valerie Sanders, in *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), vol. 3, p. 368.
34. See Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chap. 6.
35. “The Old Saloon,” *Blackwood’s Magazine* 151 (June 1887), 758.