

A LITERATURE OF MY OWN:
LIVING WITH VICTORIAN WOMEN WRITERS¹

BY ELAINE SHOWALTER

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I am very happy to be here this evening, and happy to have given my collection of Victorian women writers to the Rutgers University Libraries. Indeed, I want to encourage everyone to enjoy the satisfactions of giving away their books while they are still alive. My cohabitation with Victorian women writers began very early; like most young women readers, I identified with *Jane Eyre* and *Maggie Tulliver*. I was even married in the Unitarian Church in Philadelphia with a passage from George Eliot—an appropriate choice, since, like Eliot, I had lost my faith and married a man whom my family disapproved. In graduate school, in the 1960s, I knew about the great collections of Victorian literature in the United States, and even worked in most



Figure 2.1 Elaine Showalter

of them: the Michael Sadleir Collection at UCLA, the Parrish Collection at Princeton, the Gordon Ray Collection at the University of Illinois, Urbana, and the Robert Wolff Collection at Harvard.

But the story I want to tell you this evening begins in the 1970s and is about the beginnings of my own efforts to collect editions by Victorian women writers, and about the ways the women and this quest came to mirror my own professional problems and my life.

In 1970, I got my Ph.D. from the University of California at Davis, with a diploma signed by Governor Ronald Reagan, and became an assistant

professor in the English Department at Douglass [College at Rutgers]. Among the many influences in my life at the time, two stand out in my memory. First of all, I became friends with a young professor of English named Ann Douglass (now at Columbia), who specialized in American literature and was writing a book on American women writers. Ann and I actually made a pact to divvy up the whole world of women writers between us, with me taking the British and her getting the American, and at the time we seemed to have no competition for the turf.

Ann had also assembled a wonderful collection of old editions of books by and about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American women that she used for her research. She had bought them at yard sales and used-book stores, and she had amassed a remarkable and meaningful personal library. I felt inspired by her example and hoped that although I could not emulate the riches of the Sadleir and Parrish collections, which held first editions and important manuscripts, I would be able to collect the novels and letters of scores of Victorian women writers that were still almost unavailable in the United States.

At the same time, I was hearing a great deal about the Rutgers critical method of “close reading.” As someone who had a rather peripatetic academic career, I had only a dim idea of what close reading might be (it’s the New Critical technique of reading very slowly, looking carefully at each word and sentence), and for several years I was afraid to ask anyone and reveal my ignorance. But to me close reading always sounded like physical intimacy with books, and that was something I liked very much. In the libraries where I had written my dissertation, at UCLA, Berkeley, and Princeton, I had loved most of all working in the stacks among old volumes of nineteenth-century journals and novels whose bindings shed and flaked all over me, so that I would emerge from the stacks like Tess of the d’Urbervilles from the fields, stained with the dyes and juices of books.

In 1972, thanks to the support of Dick Poirier, I got a fellowship from Rutgers to spend a year in London finishing my book on women writers. And off I went with my husband, who had a Princeton fellowship, and our children, ages two and seven. That year in London was magical in many respects, not least of all for the way that I felt, for the first time in my life, intensely connected to the past. Our elderly landlady in Kensington, Mrs. Hesson, who wore thick tweeds, had a posh accent, and was always coming around to tell me how to hang my grouse and where to get my writing paper

engraved and similar useful things, turned out to be a writer who used the name “Marie Seaton”—itself an echo of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. In the beginning of the century, she had been an ardent supporter of the Russian Revolution and had gone to Moscow, where she became the mistress of the great Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. She was also his biographer. I would later discover that while she was in Moscow in the 1930s, Mrs. Hesson had befriended the black American poet Langston Hughes, who was there traveling, had given him a book of short stories by D. H. Lawrence, and had inspired him to start writing fiction.

I was doing most of my research at the Fawcett Library, the repository of the papers and collections of the liberal wing of the British suffragettes. Located in an old house near Victoria Station, the Fawcett was a treasure trove, but also a messy, uncataloged heap of papers and books, shelved and scattered in a warren of rooms intermittently heated by a Dickensian collection of heating devices—gas-metered furnaces, radiators, and electric fires. The Fawcett was also an informal club for young feminist historians and literary scholars—like its name, a flowing source of ideas and information—and I met many of the people who would become my close intellectual and personal friends there. In addition, the library was still the headquarters of the Fawcett Society Suffragette Fellowship, which met every month to hear a lecture and plan activities such as the annual laying of a wreath on the statue of Millicent Garret Fawcett. In January 1973, I was invited to speak at one of these meetings: “Dr. Elaine Showalter will talk on feminism in relation to the Female Studies courses now frequently found in many American universities. . . . Dr. Showalter, currently in England on a Rutgers University research fellowship, has been actively involved for some years in women’s affairs in the USA.” In February, the newsletter added, the speaker was “the Dowager Lady Birdwood,” who would speak about “the position of the family in modern society. . . . It is hoped the meeting will participate in a lively and constructive discussion. There are *no refreshments* at these meetings.”

Across town, in the basement of the Kensington Palace, were housed the papers and memorabilia of the militant suffragettes who had been on a hunger strike and imprisoned before World War I, and I also spent many days there, reading their diaries and letters. Now the militants are splendidly housed in the Museum of London, and the Fawcett is about to build a magnificent state-of-the-art library in East London, but I like to remember

these collections as they were when I discovered them, like a scholar-adventurer of the old days I had long admired. In fact, while Rutgers has the books, I have already started giving my personal papers to the Fawcett Library, in the hopes that if in the future someone wants to know about me, they will have to follow my footsteps, or air miles, and go to London.

Emulating Ann Douglass, I had begun to search for books in catalogs, shops, sales, book fairs, auctions, and even the book collector's mecca, the town of Hay-on-Wye, which specializes in old-book stores. At the same time, I was writing to libraries all over England in search of the letters and manuscripts of women writers, then uncataloged, forgotten, and often hidden in the papers of their male acquaintances or relatives. Among the stories of those quests, none was more rewarding and surprising than the search for Sarah Grand.

Sarah Grand was the pen name of the writer and feminist activist Frances Elizabeth Clarke McFall, who lived from 1854 to 1943, and who had invented the term "New Woman" and popularized it in her best seller of 1893, *The Heavenly Twins*. In the 1890s, Grand was a celebrated figure who knew all the literary lions of her day. But after the war, she had been forgotten as a writer, and she ended her years as the honorary mayoress—in other words, official hostess—of Bath. I wrote to the various libraries and archives, and on the first of February 1973, received a letter from the director of the Bath Municipal Libraries: "The reference library has a fair amount of letters and papers by Sarah Grand. The bulk of this material consists of letters and notes addressed to Miss Gladys E. M. Singers-Bigger."

On a chilly winter day, I opened the paper cartons, which had sat untouched since her death, and discovered that Gladys Singers-Bigger, an admirer and adoring disciple of Grand, had not only arranged Grand's letters and manuscripts and recorded all of her idol's words and deeds for almost eighteen years, but also had carefully preserved Grand's cigarette butts, each one meticulously labeled with the date when it had been consumed. Their relationship, I discovered as I read through the stacks of material and correspondence, was one-sided and intense. Grand and Gladys had met in 1925, when Grand was already seventy-one. Gladys, a bookish spinster, had developed a passionate attachment to Grand, and she devoted her life to serving the woman she called Madame. By January 1930, she had decided to write a biography, and she started to save every scrap. Singers-Bigger also attempted to interest publishers in a Grand anthology, and she persuaded a

local clergyman and friend, Charles Whitby, to write an introduction to the projected “Sarah Grand Miscellany.” He agreed to have a try: “If my essay does play a small part in reminding a fickle public of one who was once deservedly high in its favour—well and good! If not, it’s only one more casualty and I shall not break my heart.”

But the Miscellany was never published, and when Singers-Bigger tried to revive the project after Grand’s death, Whitby tried gently to discourage her, explaining in a 1943 letter that although he would gladly do his bit to revive interest in both Grand and her books,

The fact has to be faced that, for the present, the G.P. [general public] seems oblivious to both; even here, where she did so much for us and the City, her death passed almost unheeded. I don’t feel a bit hopeful about my own chance of being able to awaken public interest in this high-minded woman and her fascinating novels.

Indeed, the task seemed hopeless. Whitby himself was eighty, living in a bomb-damaged house in a “ravaged district.”

Still, the correspondence made clear, at one point he had written an essay on Grand’s life and works. But when I finally, triumphantly, unearthed the folder labeled “Whitby,” a single leaf of paper fluttered out. It said: “Sent to Professor W.K. Wimsatt at Yale University.” Words cannot describe my frustration and chagrin. I felt like an explorer beaten to the South Pole—and beaten, no less, by an Ivy League grandee, the great scholar of Pope and the eighteenth-century. Nonetheless, I wrote to Wimsatt to ask if he had the material, and a letter quickly came back, along with a copy of the introduction:

18 April 1973

Dear Professor Showalter:

Well, you are in luck. And my old Popean friend and correspondent Gladys Singers-Bigger was foresighted.

I dig in my file and I do indeed discover the introduction which you seek, fourteen single-space typed pages, with an intended t.p. for the book and one-page foreword by a countess

somebody. . . . I think one of the letters in that file, from Miss Singers-Bigger in her fine hand and at moments somewhat wandering style, must say something about her relation with Madame Grand.

There was another part of Wimsatt's letter, to which I will return; but I eagerly read the Whitby materials, which discussed the novels and reminisced about his own acquaintance with Sarah Grand while she was Mayoress of Bath. There was much more material than I could use in my study of women writers, but I did not have time for a full biography of Grand or any of the fascinating women I was discovering. So I took what I needed and moved on. Gradually over the year my book took shape, although it seemed so new and strange to me that I had many anxiety dreams. In one, I brought the manuscript wrapped in newspaper to a friend to read, and when she opened it, instead of paper it was mortadella—the biggest kind of baloney. (I suppose “mortadella” was also a dream pun on “her death.”) When I submitted a paper on Grand's novels to the December 1973 MLA, the reply came from Professor Ruth Roberts at the University of California, Riverside: “It is certainly interesting . . . the question is whether to take these books as *Literature*.”²

But despite my fears, *A Literature of Their Own* was published in the spring of 1977 by Princeton University Press, and did well. In 1978, it came out in paperback in the United Kingdom from the new feminist publishing company Virago, and it reached its intended audience of British women. Through my publisher Carmen Callil, I met Gillian Kersley, a novelist *manqué* living in Bath. As Kersley herself later explained:

In 1978 Virago published Elaine Showalter's book *A Literature of Their Own*, about British women novelists, and Sarah Grand's name emerged in print for the first time since her death in 1943. Carmen Callil noticed that material about Sarah was in Bath and kindly suggested that instead of writing unpublishable novels I should try more beneficial research. To Carmen and Elaine I offer my first thanks.³

Within the month she had “met Madame Sarah Grand and her acolyte Gladys Singers-Bigger through the first of Gladys's diaries.” [Indeed, Kersley wrote:]

It was the perfect introduction for a non-biographer. The diaries, to me, coupled the emotion and poignancy of romance with such unimaginable and compulsive detail that fact towered above fiction. . . . Instant involvement and compassion made my hours in the library as real as those outside. I came home saturated in Gladys and Sarah, and eager to return to their lives in the twenties.⁴

As Gillian Kersley began to read the four hundred letters, volumes of diaries, manuscripts, and press cuttings, and to outline her biography of Sarah Grand, we kept up a rich correspondence:

Dear Elaine,
You should be settled happily at home by now and the B.M. lies deep in fog. Which is roughly how I feel with Sarah. The more one finds out, the greater the niggles and contradictions. In a way a broader canvas would be less confusing, a bit of guesswork or conflict can be glossed over. With this minute sampler I feel the need for proof at every stitch and there's war between a jolly, expansive statement and the minutiae of fact. She was such an unexpansive, secretive individual!⁵

Trying to establish the facts of Grand's mysterious life, Kersley too found many gaps. Some I could help her with: A maddening reference in a few letters from a friend of S. about "the typescript of Dr. Whitby's essay on S.G. and her books"⁶ and "What a calamity that Ella (dog) got hold of Dr. Whitby's Preface."⁷ No one knows anything of it here, so I assume the dog digested it." But other problems were more intractable. "I feel more and more that Gladys should figure . . . all that earnest unrequited love and dedication."⁸ Research was tough and expensive: "Mainly dreary finance—all those dollars for search fees to prove boring details of births and marriages and visiting benighted spots like Warrington. What do dependent biographers do? . . . This is the stage where cheap pregnancy (only pen and exercise books) leads into feeding and clothing Sarah and I'm tempted to abort or seek adoption. Not so funny."⁹

But she persisted. At Virago, Carmen Callil was encouraging Gillian too. As she wrote to me, “Gillian is doing wonderful work with the diaries—Gladys’s relation with Sarah Grand is becoming apparent a-s a particularly sad sado-masochistic female friendship! P.S. What do you think of Charlotte Mew?” Meanwhile, other scholars were discovering Grand as well. From Australia in 1979, Joan Huddleston wrote that she was compiling a Sarah Grand bibliography, and asked, “Have you got a copy of Dr. Whitby’s memoir of her?” Overall, she thought, “There seems to be a growing Sarah Grand industry, which is all to the good!”¹⁰ In the United States Martha Vicinus at Berkeley was part of it: “I confess that my heart sank when I heard two other people are writing biographies of Sarah G.—I guess no one is truly undiscovered! Certainly she is far and away the most interesting writer I’ve been reading.”¹¹

In 1983, Gillian Kersley’s biography, titled *Darling Madame: Sarah Grand and Devoted Friend*, was published by Virago. It came out too late for W.K. Wimsatt to read; he too was dead, and I had pondered for a decade about the second half of his letter to me. It had read:

Will you meanwhile, now, tell me something in return? . . .
When and where did Miss Singers-Bigger die? I had a letter from her dated October 9, 1968, in which she spoke of hoping to be elected to the Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association, somewhere in Surrey. She was suffering from arthritis and could no longer go out. But then I find another letter dated September 16, 1969, still coming from 2 Darlington Street, Bathwick, Bath—which is the last address I have for her, and I think the last letter. After that (I did not write until some months later), two or three letters came back from that address with the notation “Not known at this address.” A friend of mine who visited Bath called there and had the same response. This I thought particularly mean and shoddy.
. . . Your letter came like a voice from the dead.

But I had not been able to answer Wimsatt’s question in 1973. I knew that Singers-Bigger had died in 1970, but I didn’t know the circumstances of her death. In the epilogue to Kersley’s book, I finally learned what happened to Gladys:

When she could no longer move about easily, she discouraged the visits of old friends and stopped seeing most of them. She lived in one dark room on the ground floor of 2 Darlington Street . . . divided into two by a curtain and containing gas fires she was only allowed to use during certain hours of the day and which she could not reach to light herself. Increasingly crippled with arthritis and partially blind, she relied on her landlady to bring her a meal each day and to shop for her. Towards the end, she subsisted mainly on bread and tea and an occasional half packet of fish fingers.

On the night of January 5, 1970, the coldest of the year, the landlady turned off the gas at eight o'clock. The next day, Gladys was discovered with her temperature below 85 degrees. Taken to the hospital, she died of pneumonia and hypothermia. Among her papers was found a bill for maintenance of the grave of Sarah Grand. The feminist rediscovery and the Sarah Grand industry came three years too late to save Gladys.

Critical memory in academia is short, and each new generation forms itself by battling with the old. As Grand's novels have been reissued, and as she has become the subject of many articles and books, the way in which she was rediscovered has been obliterated too. In a chapter on Sarah Grand in his 1994 book on Victorian fiction, John Kucich, for example, complains about my "conventional" and "dismissive" reading of the novels in comparison to his sophisticated theoretical appreciation of them. What was anomalous, lonely, and unprecedented in 1973 seems merely conventional only twenty years later. But this very shortness of critical memory makes the preservation of archives and old books all the more crucial. It is good to know that Sarah and Gladys and their sisters will have a good home in New Brunswick.

Notes

- I This is a revised text of the Fifteen Louis Faugeres III Bishop Lecture delivered on April 17, 2000 at Rutgers University.
- 2 Letter to Elaine Showalter, August 30, 1972.
- 3 Gillian Kersley, *Darling Madame: Sarah Grand and Devoted Friend*, London: Virago, 1983, xv.
- 4 *Darling Madame*, xv.
- 5 Letter to Elaine Showalter, November 9, 1978.
- 6 Letter to Elaine Showalter, November 27, 1978.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Letter to Elaine Showalter, November 16, 1978.
- 10 Letter to Elaine Showalter, January 13, 1979.
- 11 Letter to Elaine Showalter, February 13, 1979.