

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Breaking Ground in a Well-Tilled Field

*How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present.* Alison Booth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xvi + 423 pp.

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<1>In the borderlands between history and literature, in the interdisciplinary field of women's studies, Alison Booth has found an overlooked but productive ground: nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Anglo-American collective biographies of women. Booth herself notes that her study "is the first full-length interpretation of the form in which writings about women continue to appear" (3). One hopes that it will not be the last. In fact, just this year Karenni Gore Schiff, daughter of Al Gore, has written *Lighting the Way: Nine Women Who Changed America*, a collection that includes biographies of Mother Jones, Ida Wells Barnett, and others, so a study that extends to twenty-first century collective biographies may well be necessary. The strengths and weaknesses of *How to Make It as a Woman* reflect its status as a ground-breaking work in a surprisingly neglected corner of the well-tilled fields of nineteenth-century studies, women's studies, and life writing. Among these strengths and weaknesses is the comprehensiveness of Booth's study, which enables her to produce a complex, culturally-sensitive mapping of these works but also resists a reviewer's overview.

<2>Booth opens with instructions on how to navigate the book including the online apparatus that accompanies it. The first chapter constructs a definition and history of "prosopography," Booth's term for collective biographies. Her definition draws on multi-disciplinary sources, including theorists such as Paul de Man, historians such as Lawrence Stone and Katharine S. B. Keats-Rohan, and sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman. Yet, Booth explains, considered from the vantage of feminist literary studies, prosopography has a distinctive genealogy. It begins with the example set by fifteenth-century author Christiane de Pizan's *City of Ladies*, a painstaking search through written records for foremothers or, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning would later write, "grandmothers" (Booth 89). In a later chapter, Booth describes Virginia Woolf's unacknowledged variation on de Pizan's move, in a *Room of One's Own*, as an "overstatement of simultaneous plenitude and dearth" (232). This strategy, she suggests, belied Woolf's experience growing up in an upper-middle-class, intellectual household that may have owned at least one of these earlier collective works (Booth 333).

<3>The search for "grandmothers" is also complicated by one's own response to "mothers" and "sisters." Part of Booth's chapter on prosopographer Anna Jameson depicts fellow feminist and author Harriet Martineau's disparagement of her and her work, which existed within a framework of women "regulat[ing] each other's performances" (184). Even though Booth is clearly sympathetic to Jameson, she acknowledges Martineau's motivations: her "slighting of practically everyone derives in part from an awareness that a canon of women is always in the works, always at the margins of a canon of men" (185). Later Booth herself admits her own resistance to becoming Elaine Showalter's "disciple" (277). While she acknowledges that the writings of scholars like Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have served as her "practical mentors," she concedes the limitations, both professional and theoretical, which too close an alignment with such "mothers" might entail (Booth 277-278).

<4>In yet another of the book's many threads, Booth maps the transatlantic nineteenth-century literary field. Instead of seeking her episteme in fictional and prescriptive writing, as previous examinations have, Booth seeks it first in short biographies. The first category, sensational biographies, includes Hannah Duston, who escaped captivity by murdering her Native American captors, as well as – in an unexpected juxtaposition – Florence Nightingale. Encompassing two different kinds of women, these biographies shed light on Victorian culture with its strong strains of sensationalism and theatricality. Another chapter is devoted wholly to the lives of female aid-workers and missionaries. Earlier collective biographies had downplayed readers' abilities to



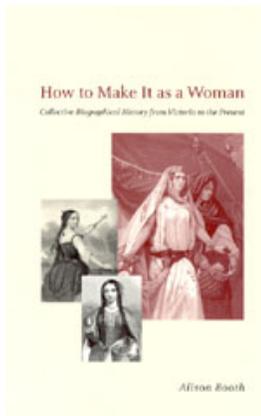
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emulate subjects such as Hannah More. For writers such as Asahel Clark Kendrick, More's public service was perhaps too public, and the belief that women had duties beyond their families' well-being had not yet become as pervasive as it eventually would become. By contrast, later collections' exemplars such as the author/missionary Emily Chubbuck Judson reminded readers of the lives that they too had the potential to write, collect, or even become the subject of once they were willing to assume the role of ministering to others. These missionary collections evolved into works that encouraged still other vocations, as variations on and, eventually, alternatives to women's ministry. Collections such as the 1927 *Girls Who Did* and the 1933 *Angels and Amazons* specialized in biographies of women who had entered occupations for the sake of vocation alone.

<5>Booth's fifth chapter extends the scope of her inquiry to the collective biographies of African-American women. A number of influences within Anglo-American culture such as imperialism and the belief in "progress" informed mainstream prosopographies even as they seemed to provide a means of representing women's experience. As Booth points out earlier, these works often depicted their subjects as "active female figure[s] surrounded by darker, prostrate forms" (120). In response to mainstream society's racism, late nineteenth-century African-American writers and editors would produce collective biographies that simultaneously refuted these beliefs while representing their subjects as women who "[had] gained their distinction through the abjection of others in need of help" much as Hannah More or Elizabeth Fry had done (Booth 198). This aspect of Booth's inquiry leads to a final chapter in which she discusses the roles that depictions of Queen Victoria, both visual and textual, played in collective biographies, both as an emblem of normative domesticity and as the British ruler who inspired and epitomized narratives of social progress.

<6>Another topic Booth addresses in this wide-ranging work is the rise of the female public intellectual as a figure whose biography both reflects and contradicts the mappings of literary and women's studies. This route extends from the first chapter's history of collective biographies, to the second, third, and fifth chapters' discussion of such biographies as typologies to which prominent intellectuals contributed, to the fourth, sixth, and seventh chapters' discussion of individual feminists such as Anna Jameson, Virginia Woolf, and Elaine Showalter. In her presentation of Jameson's diverse interests – art history, feminism, travel writing, anthropology, and biography – Booth advocates a more interdisciplinary construction of women's studies. This advocacy complements sections of her chapter on women's ministry. Here, she leads readers to consider a mapping of the literary field, which privileges an author's ability to teach and promote social reform. This mapping is epitomized by the prominence given to Hannah More in various collections. It also enables readers, building on Linda H. Peterson's reading of *Jane Eyre* in its cultural context, to read Jane's refusal of the missionary St. John Rivers' marriage proposal alongside Emily Chubbuck Judson's opposite choice. However, in discussion of Jameson's successors and the various projects of literary studies (modernism, New Criticism, feminism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism), Booth reveals the factors that have obstructed truly interdisciplinary scholarship, even in the study of life writing. Her final chapter, a miniprosopography of Queen Victoria and some contemporary literary scholars (Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Booth herself), provides a theoretical overview that explains why scholars of the 2000s are now ready to turn to this particular productive niche in nineteenth-century studies.

<7>Tellingly, despite the author's encouragement to "[e]njoy the pictures" (xvi), I have glossed over Booth's use of art history and illustrations. This use is especially prominent in the second chapter where she contrasts artists' interpretation of the Biblical Judith with prosopographers' efforts to assimilate her into their collections. It is also prominent in Booth's describing the authors of these biographical pieces as "presenters." Throughout the book, her interpretation of the illustrations from the collective biographies enables twenty-first century readers to comprehend these texts as their original readers read them – as illustrated volumes initially intended for "shared display" (Booth 29) or "SUNDAY READING" (Timpson iv qtd in Booth 203, capitals his) – and as "prop box[es] full of iconography" in which individual differences and historiography did not matter (Booth 39).

<8>As Booth's image of the prop box with its contents suggests, the genre of collective biography forced its subjects to conform to typology. Elizabeth Fry, for example was represented as the exemplar of the ministering woman despite the character flaws, "nervous ailments," "depressions," and dependence on alcohol and laudanum which were recounted in a 1980 biography (Booth 150). In the 1850s, a similar adherence to typology conversely affected

depictions of Elizabeth I who was represented as “the bad queen type” (Booth 258). An 1877 collection used Charlotte Bronte to exemplify “the Worthy Daughter” even as biographer Harriet Martineau and literary critic Margaret Oliphant presented alternate readings of the novelist’s career that belied this typology (Booth 57, 185-6). Not surprisingly, an interdisciplinary approach could do more to examine both divergences and convergences between each discipline’s definition of Booth’s key term. Booth’s subtitle – *Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* – allows a reader to approach her topic from history, a discipline which has had an often embattled relationship with literature. Additionally, even though Booth critiques feminists’ emphasis on literary women, this emphasis on individuals within a specific profession or “field” is more compatible with the approach to prosopography that sociologist Donald Broady espouses. In other words, this narrowed focus enables scholars to organize data in a more coherent and productive manner, a consideration which may be more important to contemporary academics than to nineteenth-century readers.

<9>While the comprehensiveness of *How to Make It as a Woman* is essential to its role as the first full-length interpretation of an as yet under-documented form, it is also somewhat daunting. This will not prevent a diligent reader from making use of Booth’s insights and research. It will certainly encourage readers to build on this book in their own research and teaching. It may even encourage readers to continue to explore the borderlands of literature and history or develop a more sociological approach to tackling the problems in studying female authorship which Booth has located.

#### Works Cited

Broady, Donald. “French Prosopography[:] Definition and Suggested Readings.” N.d. given. *Sociology of Education and Culture*. Uppsala University. 1 Jan. 2006. <http://www.skeptron.ilu.uu.se/broady/sec/p-broady-frenchprosop.htm>

