NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 17.1 (Spring 2021)

Bourrier, Karen. *Victorian Bestseller: The Life of Dinah Craik*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019. 328 pages

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<1>Karen Bourrier's fascinating biography of Dinah Craik convincingly casts the neglected author as the quintessential woman writer of her era. Bourrier is the first to fully recount the story of Craik's life with the help of a treasure trove of "over one thousand previously unpublished letters and fourteen years of diaries" (vii). This abundance of primary source material allows Bourrier to bring Craik to life with a brilliant specificity, yet she acknowledges that the record is nevertheless marked by gaps and silences. Not surprisingly, one element missing from the record is Craik's correspondence with her husband. Discovering the daily details of such intimate relationships is always challenging as domestic partners rarely need to correspond with one another. Furthermore, Victorians considered it prudent to destroy romantic letters in order to prevent prying eyes from uncovering potentially embarrassing details. Craik did not want her life story to be written and, as Bourrier points out, "lamented the fate of those authors who were 'hapless enough to leave behind them materials for a biography'" (xiii). In fact, Craik gleefully reports having burned a collection of her own letters with the help of her daughter, presumably to prevent any scandalous biographical tales from being told.

<2>While Craik led a seemingly conventional existence and maintained a respectable reputation, tragedy loomed large in her private life. Her father, dissenting preacher Thomas Mulock, was plagued by mental instability. He supported his daughter's literary aspirations but was either disruptive or absent as he struggled financially, served time in prison and a mental institution, and eventually deserted his wife and three teenaged children in 1845. To make matters worse, Mrs. Mulock died of breast cancer later the same year, leaving nineteen-year-old Dinah and her two younger brothers "'entirely destitute' until they could find employment, presumably because they could not inherit until they were twenty-one" (39). Her brother Thomas was forced to join the navy where "he died, tragically, from a fall from a mast" before turning twenty years old (56). Her youngest brother Ben was a talented civil engineer and photographer who was plagued by depression. As he floundered in both his career and his romantic life, Ben was confined to an asylum. Upon his escape in 1863, he was struck in the head by a wagon wheel and killed in what Bourrier claims may have been a suicide. He was just thirty-three. Having lost all of her immediate family members, Dinah took solace in her marriage to George Craik. Craik was eleven years her junior and his parents disapproved of the match because, as his father James Craik put it, "the world . . . would regard the union 'not merely as unsuitable, but all things considered, as ridiculous'" (146). Dinah had known George since they were children, but their friendship grew into something more when she nursed him in her home after his leg was

amputated as the result of a railway accident in 1861. They wed in 1865 and were by all accounts a happy couple, though Dinah regretted that they remained childless. As if living the plot of one of Craik's novels, the couple adopted a baby girl who had been abandoned on a nearby church doorstep in 1869. Their daughter Dorothy became the focus of Dinah's later life.

<3>While Bourrier's book is explicitly biographical—it is arranged chronologically by life stages including childhood, teen years, and motherhood—Craik may well have been pleased with its significant focus on her career and its relationship to women's authorship and publishing in the nineteenth century. Indeed, Bourrier pays a great deal of attention to Craik's key literary publications and to "the author not as a solitary genius but an interdependent subject" who was a crucial player on the literary scene (xi). Bourrier carefully explores what she calls the "literary sociability" of Craik and the many writers and publishers she associated with. Through these collaborative networks, Craik was able to combine her personal and professional lives in productive ways, tempering her authorial ambition even while developing close relationships with key figures in the arts and publishing industries. Craik's deft navigation of the literary world demonstrates how important it was that women were able to operate as literary businesswomen from the hub of the home.

<4>At just nineteen and the eldest of three siblings, Craik must have felt a great deal of pressure to earn a living by her pen. Through her regular attendance at the literary soirees of Irish novelist Anna Maria Hall and her editor husband Samuel Carter Hall, she was initiated into creative circles that included the managers of Covent Garden Theatre, Pre-Raphaelite artists John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, and the world-famous singer Jenny Lind. Bourrier traces the concrete impact that Mrs. Hall's "at-homes" had as Hall "was a frequent contributor to the periodicals in which Dinah first published, including the *New Monthly Belle Assemblée* and *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*" (33). In fact, "from 1844 to 1848, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, Dinah published at least twenty pieces in the *New Monthly Belle Assemblée*" including poems, short stories, a biographical essay, and a translation (33). Building on the connections and experience she gained from Hall and others, she would publish her first novel, *The Ogilvies* (1849) and begin to establish her authorial identity.

<5>With the help of the Chambers brothers in the late 1840s, Craik entered a more mature phase of her career, contributing longer works of fiction to the *Chambers's Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Tracts*and *Papers for the People* as she tapped into the themes of "self-help and moral improvement" that characterized these publications (45). She also began writing didactic children's books for Chapman and Hall (the firm that had published her first novel), including *Cola Monti* and *Rhoda's Lesson* for which she "was gaining skill as a businesswoman as well as a writer" (57). George Craik's position as a partner at Macmillan's gave her additional publishing opportunities and paved the way for her position as a manuscript reader for the publishing house. After her marriage, Craik's fiction took a turn toward the romantic, though Bourrier argues that critical assessments of her fiction as conservative are not entirely accurate as she "tackled the idea of the seemingly unsuitable marriage. The couples she wrote about all appear (and in some cases are) ill-matched in terms of age, ability, class, race, or affection for one another" (147-148). While not critically esteemed, the popular genre of the domestic romance infused with "a broadly Christian moral message" was amenable to magazine

publication and thus a lucrative path toward becoming a bestselling novelist (viii). Craik skillfully used the periodical press to make herself a household name.

<6>With four novels under her belt, Craik "shifted her focus to the issues that beset masculinity in the mid-nineteenth-century" writing *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) and *A Life for a Life* (1859) (86). John Halifax served as the model of "an exceptionally good man" told from the point of view of Phineas Fletcher, his disabled friend, while the murderous Max Urquhart of *A Life* demonstrates the worst in men. Bourrier notes that Fletcher's narration makes the typical rags to riches tale of Halifax stand out as he expresses "the weakness and emotional sensitivity that his manlier friend cannot" even while the account of their friendship gives Halifax "the opportunity to demonstrate his gentleness and tenderness, qualities that Dinah argues make a true gentleman" (92-93). The novel was critically acclaimed as well as stunningly popular, selling 250,000 copies in the United Kingdom and appearing in at least forty-five editions in the United States by 1900 (107). Yet, Bourrier makes it clear that the novel "made her reputation, not her fortune" (108). Throughout the 1860s, Craik would focus her attention on contributing to the booming market in family magazines such as *Macmillan's*, *Cornhill*, and *Good Words*. The serialization of *Mistress and Maid* (a novel focused on women's shared labor and the value of education) in *Good Words* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, followed by its publication in volume form by both Hurst and Blackett in the U.K. and Harper's in the U.S., catapulted Craik into financial comfort. Bourrier contends that "it is no exaggeration to say that it was not *John Halifax, Gentleman* that made her name and fortune, but rather her steady output in the illustrated family magazine" throughout the rest of her career (109). As Bourrier puts it, "the terms for the serialization of her fiction remained high for almost twenty years" as she continued to publish serially and in volume form on both sides of the Atlantic, receiving between 800 and 1,000 pounds per novel (128).

<7>Upon achieving the financial stability she had worked toward, Craik focused on securing her own legacy and her daughter's future. Even though her marriage was amicable, Bourrier demonstrates that Dinah was eager to keep her finances independent from her husband's, going so far as to draw up a prenuptial agreement to be sure that she maintained control of her earnings and property. She also purchased a house that would remain in her own name and "became rather fond of telling people that she built the house with books" (164). Likewise, she made sure "that her property and earnings would ultimately go to her adopted daughter" (175). When the Craiks first discussed adopting Dorothy, one issue that weighed heavily on Dinah's mind was the possibility that the so-called sins of the mother would be visited upon the child. While they pressed on with the adoption, the very end of Dinah's life was marred by her daughter's pregnancy out of wedlock. This scandal, which seems to have been fairly well hidden by an impending wedding, may well have hastened Dinah's death from heart disease as she spent the final weeks of her life in distress over the incident. Despite the sad personal ending to her story, Craik's reputation as "a national treasure" persisted (222). She was revered as a good wife and mother whose books were wholesome, if old-fashioned, and particularly well-suited to young female readers. However, Bourrier's compelling biography illustrates that Dinah Craik was much, much more than that. Her navigation of the publishing industry and attention to her legacy—both financial and literary—demonstrate what a savvy professional woman writer she was.