

The Reflection of Victorian Gender Ideologies on  
the *Dictionary of National Biography*:  
Perceptions of Women of Letters in the Late Victorian Literary World

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『イギリス国民伝記辞典』に見られるヴィクトリア朝のジェンダー・イデオロギーの影響  
—ヴィクトリア朝末期の文壇における女流作家へのまなざし—

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**Abstract:** This essay aimed to illustrate how Victorian gender ideologies affected the way individual subjects were described in the *Dictionary of National Biography* by analysing articles on writers written by Richard Garnett (1835-1906), especially female writers. Garnett was representative not only of the *DNB* as an institution but of the late Victorian literary world in general. The analysis therefore revealed the general perception of women of letters in the late Victorian literary world as well as the typical gender characteristics of *DNB* articles.

**Keywords:** *DNB*, Richard Garnett, Gender Ideologies, Women of Letters, Late Victorian England

## 1. Introduction

In late Victorian England, a remarkable enterprise led to a cultural and literary monument for the British nation – the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*). This great national record was originally published in 63 volumes between 1885 and 1900. According to Sidney Lee (1859-1926), its second editor, it contained biographies of ‘all men and women of British or Irish race who have achieved any reasonable measure of distinction in any walk of life’ (‘The *Dictionary*’ x). Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) was the first editor, and his position was taken over by Lee in 1891. Lee went on to complete the alphabetical sequence in 1900, and published supplementary volumes in 1901 and 1912. The *DNB* was kept up-to-date until 1996, and in 2004 was renamed the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*ODNB*), when all the articles contained in the *DNB* were revised or rewritten and new articles added.

The publication of the new *ODNB* led to a variety of research on the original *DNB*, and these studies have expressed contradictory views on whether the *DNB* and its initial supplements were deeply steeped in Victorian culture. Some critics state that the *DNB* clearly reflects the time and the place of its production. David Cannadine, for example, refers to the dictionary as a ‘great Victorian monument,’ and observes that ‘[m]oral judgments came thick, fast and firm’ in this work of ‘late 19th-century self-regard’ (3). Ian McCalman describes the *DNB* figuratively as ‘a great imperial flagship,’ which ‘sailed through the second half of the nineteenth century unshakably confident of its values and virtues’ (iv). Elizabeth Baigent likewise senses pride in the ascendancy of the British Empire in the *DNB*, and designates it ‘a monument to the nineteenth-century conception of the nation state as the fundament of world order and high point of civilization’ (‘Recreating’ 225). Contrarily, some critics such as H. C. G. Matthew and Lawrence Goldman claim that the *DNB* is essentially independent from the dominant discourses of late Victorian England, although they are in a minority. H. C. G. Matthew refutes the view that the *DNB* echoes Victorian national triumphalism and national pride, asserting that it ‘avoided to a remarkable extent the jingoistic tone and the state-worship’ of the late Victorian age (12). Goldman attempts to prove that the dictionary is ‘a remarkably unideological and timeless production’ (112).

However, when critics consider the *DNB* in terms of gender ideology, they all argue that it clearly reflects Victorian society. Even Goldman admits that the *DNB* is not ‘unideological and timeless’ in this respect, as it has one of the common ‘Victorian deficiencies’: the underestimation of the contribution of women to British national life (121-122). The scarceness of articles on women has been provided as the clearest evidence of the deficiency. Of the 28,201 *DNB* articles published between 1885 and 1901, only 998 were written about women – only 3.5% of the total (Fenwick, *Women* 18). According to Lee, this was because: ‘the woman’s opportunities of distinction were infinitesimal in the past, and are very small compared with men’s – something like one to thirty – at the present moment’ (‘National Biography’ 273). However, this explanation is unconvincing to modern critics. They conclude that the *DNB* as a record of public national life excluded many women because it strongly espoused the Victorian concept of the separate gendered spheres and saw the various activities of women as belonging to the private sphere (Baigent, ‘Geography’ 533-534, Baigent, Brewer & Larminie 14, Fenwick, *Women* 23, Harrison ix, and Thomas 45-46). Colin Matthew, founding editor of the *ODNB*, also points out that the marginalisation of women in the British power structure was exaggerated in the *DNB* (10).

In support of the widely-accepted opinion that the *DNB* reproduced Victorian gender ideologies, this essay will illustrate how these ideologies affected the way individual subjects were described in the dictionary. This essay will thus analyse articles on writers written by Richard Garnett (1835-1906), especially female writers. Garnett was representative of the *DNB* as an institution and of the late Victorian literary world in general. The analysis will therefore reveal the typical gender characteristics of *DNB* articles and the general perception of women of letters in the late Victorian literary world.



## 2. Richard Garnett

The *DNB* articles this paper will examine were contributed by Richard Garnett, a librarian at the British Museum library. In this work, he became 'a well-known figure in literary London, much respected for his knowledge and helpfulness' (Bell). Garnett was representative of the late Victorian literary world, as suggested by an 1885 *Punch* cartoon (Fig. 1). The cartoon partly aims to caricature the increasingly pervasive presence of women in the male, intellectual space of the British Museum's Reading Room. A sole female figure, poet A. Mary F. Robinson, is depicted in the middle as outlandish and disturbing amongst the distinguished literary men in late Victorian society. It is noteworthy that Garnett is among them along with Leslie Stephen. Garnett is portrayed as the light fixture on the left with his name on the shade, and is surrounded by winged readers asking for his help. Standing next to a reading desk talking with another man, Stephen can be identified by a volume titled the 'National Biography' held under his arm. This cartoon implies that Garnett was a famous and authoritative figure in the contemporary male-dominated literary world, like Stephen.

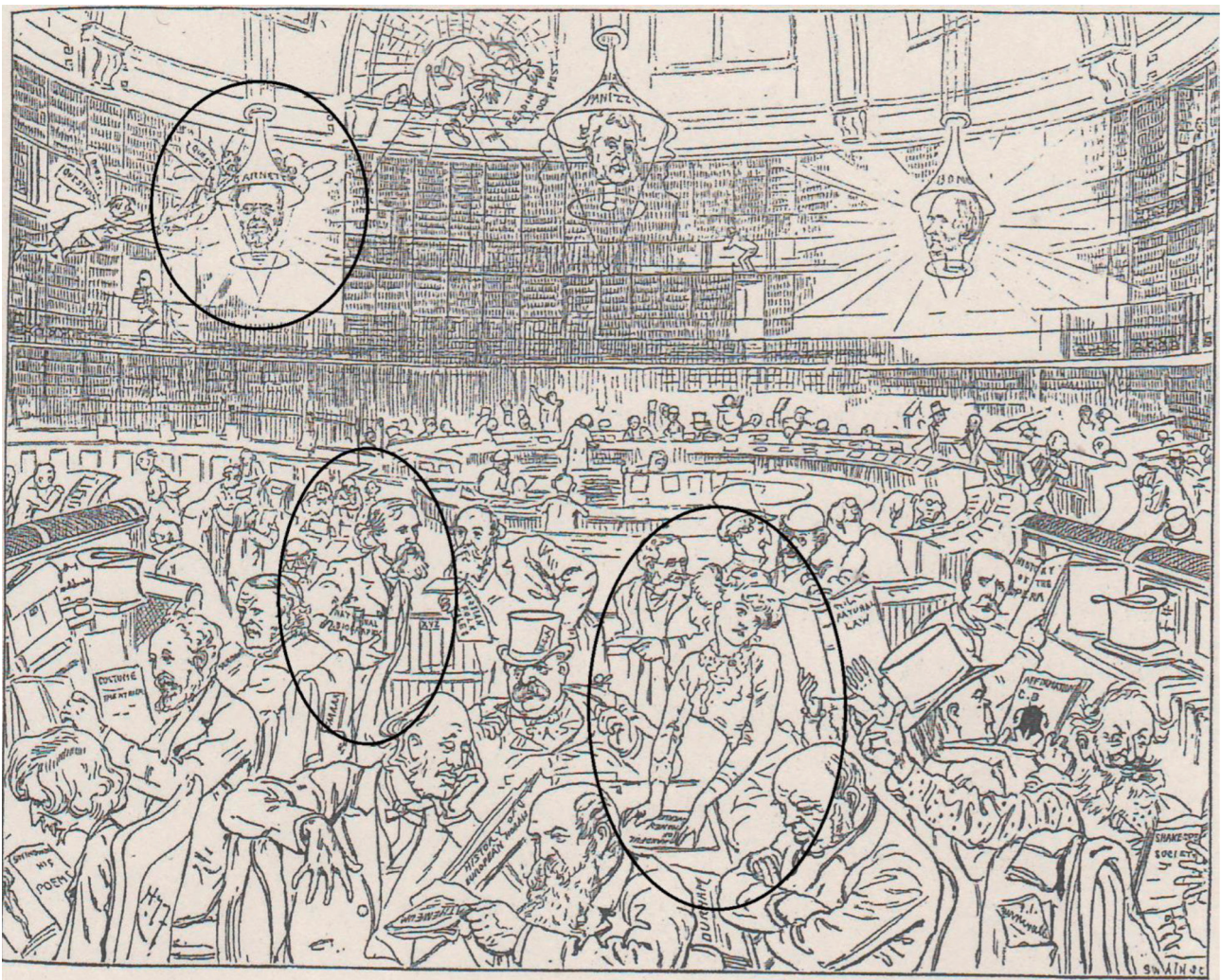


Fig. 1. 'Interiors and Exteriors. No. 5: Valuable Collection in the Reading-Room, British Museum.'

*Punch* 28 Mar. 1885: 155 (Circles Added)

Garnett was also a writer, and one of the literary activities he devoted himself to was writing articles for the *DNB*. According to Sidney Lee's statistics of the *DNB* volumes published between 1885 and 1900, he contributed 177 articles and was one of the 34 most-prolific contributors ('The *Dictionary*' xix). He was thus one of the central figures

of the institution which produced the *DNB*, and also, representative of the larger society of literary people in England. The *DNB* articles on women written by this man therefore surely represent the characteristic attitudes of both of these late Victorian literary worlds towards women.

### 3. The Emphasis on the Private in the Lives of Female Writers

The articles contributed by Richard Garnett, which are listed by Gillian Fenwick (*The Contributors' Index* 137-140), are mostly about the 18th and 19th century writers. His articles on female literary figures share a significant characteristic – an emphasis on the subjects' domestic life rather than their public career. This approach is cleared in the article on Frances Trollope (1779-1863) for example. Her first appearance in the article is in her marriage announcement at the end of the first paragraph. The next paragraph, which accounts for a quarter of the whole article, contains exclusively descriptions about her husband except for several sentences about her children. It is difficult to understand why Garnett included what is essentially a biography of her husband in this article, unless his intention was to subjugate Trollope and her public life to her husband and private life. Even in the later paragraphs, which do discuss her writing career, we come across sentences which focus on domestic matters such as her family finances. This tendency to stress the private is also clear in the article on Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897). Its first paragraph, equivalent to one-third of the article, focuses on her struggle to maintain her home and care for her children more than her public persona. Moreover, in order to highlight her status and life as a mother, this paragraph provides some relatively detailed information about her children who died before her, and concludes with the following words: 'Maternal anguish has seldom been more touchingly expressed than in Mrs. Oliphant's lamentations on her bereavements.' Like the piece on Frances Trollope, this article emphasises its subject's domestic roles of wife and mother.

The private lives of female writers are foregrounded in Garnett's articles so that their public lives are underrepresented. A part of such lives is social relationships. The *ODNB's* article on Frances Trollope, which strived to correct its predecessor's gender-specific representation, illustrates her career outside the home by discussing her friendships with a varied range of public figures:

Over the years her circle of friends encompassed such diverse characters as the actors Edmund Kean and William Charles Macready, the political figures Ugo Foscolo, General Lafayette, and Prince Metternich, the reformer Frances Wright, the artists George Hayter and Hiram Powers, and the authors Mary Russell Mitford, Charles Dickens, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (Neville-Sington)

These friendships are also described in *Frances Trollope*, a biography written by her daughter-in-law Frances Eleanor Trollope and one of Garnett's principal sources of information for his article. Nonetheless, with the focus on her familial relationships, the original *DNB* article mentions only two of these figures, Frances Wright and George Hayter, and besides, associates them with Trollope's husband rather than Trollope herself.

Garnett's articles on male writers do not focus so much on the private lives of their subjects. For example, unlike the article on his mother Frances, the article on Antony Trollope (1815-1882) gives little information about his family. Even his famous mother is mentioned very briefly and only twice. Apart from a short marriage announcement, his wife appears only in the following sentence: 'He was survived by his widow and by two sons.' Here we are also introduced to his children, but provided with no information about them. Except for these brief descriptions of his private, domestic matters, the article exclusively focuses on his education and his public activities, as well as his social relationships as a novelist and post-office official.



Significantly, Garnett's articles on women of letters go against the editorial policy of the *DNB*. D. J. Trela claims that there was 'a strong ambivalence in late-Victorian thought regarding how far private life deserved to be made public property and to what extent such private details should be used to judge public figures' (183), and that Leslie Stephen was inconsistent on this issue (201). However, very possibly Stephen believed that the private lives of his subjects did not deserve to be public property when he edited the *DNB*. As Elizabeth Baigent argues, this belief provided 'a rationale for the systematic if not comprehensive exclusion of women from the *DNB* ('The Geography' 534). In other words, the *DNB*'s policy was to concentrate on the public lives of the people they covered, which were considered to be separate from and opposed to their private lives. This policy, which reflects the Victorian concept of the separate spheres, was ignored by Garnett, who emphasised the private lives of his female subjects. This emphasis is another reflection of the same concept, which saw the private, domestic sphere as the proper realm for women. If so, both the framework and the contents of the *DNB* reveal its adherence to the gender ideology, and this ideology was prioritised over the *DNB*'s editorial policy in individual articles.

#### 4. The Metamorphosis of Female Writers into Angels in the House

The second characteristic of Garnett's articles is most clear in their concluding sections, where he usually assesses the achievements and character of his subjects. It also becomes apparent when articles on male and female writers are compared, such as Theodore Edward Hook (1788-1841) and Frances Trollope (1779-1863). The comparison highlights the differences in their focus. The article on Trollope places more importance on the assessment of personality rather than literary accomplishments compared to the article on Hook. More importantly, the assessed personality must be portrayed as morally good only when the subject is female. Garnett readily admits that '[Hook's] defects were a moral vulgarity, far more offensive than the social vulgarity it ridiculed, and a want of every quality especially characteristic of a high-minded man.' Conversely, Garnett attempts to ameliorate Trollope's notorious vulgarity by stating that '[s]he lives by the vigour of her portraits of vulgar persons, and her readers cannot help associating her with the characters she makes so entirely her own. There is nothing in her letters to confirm this impression.' He intends not only to deny that her character was incompatible with respectable femininity, but also to emphasise her ideal femininity by claiming that 'she was richly provided with solid and useful virtues – "honest, courageous, industrious, generous, and affectionate," as her character is summed up by her daughter-in-law.' Garnett never avows her inferiority in temperament, although he is willing to identify her defects as an author by saying: 'she could hardly be termed intellectual, nor was she warmly sympathetic with what is highest in literature, art, and life.'

Garnett's article seems to have similar intentions to Anthony Trollope's *An Autobiography*. As Pamela Neville-Sington states, Frances Trollope was increasingly seen as 'a "vulgar" authoress' as the Victorian age progressed because of the manifestation of political opinions with sharp satirical wit in her works. Her embarrassed son thus attempted to contradict her reputation in his own autobiography, and 'angelise' her by denying that she had any intellect or interest in politics and instead focusing on celebrating her feminine virtues. For this purpose, he declared that:

But with her politics were always an affair of the heart, as, indeed, were all her convictions. Of reasoning from causes, I think that she knew nothing. Her heart was in every way so perfect, her desire to do good to all around her so thorough, and her power of self-sacrifice so complete, that she generally got herself right in spite of her want of logic; but it must be acknowledged that she was emotional. (20)

Moreover, as suggested in the article on Frances Trollope, the language Garnett uses to assess female writers is

moralised and genderised. For example, Dinah Maria Mulock (1826-1887) is valued most for ‘the tender and philanthropic, and at the same time energetic and practical womanhood of ordinary life,’ whilst she herself is summed up as ‘not a genius.’ Barbara Hofland (bap.1770-d.1844) and Sarah Flower Adams (1805-1848) are described as ‘a true-hearted, cheerful, and affectionate woman’ and ‘delicate and truly feminine’ respectively. The articles on Jessie Cadell (1844-1884) and Annie Keary (1825-1879) depict them favourably as understanding their proper roles and sphere as women. Indeed, Cadell is esteemed as ‘[a] true woman, bright and animated in the midst of sickness and trouble, disinterestedly attached to whatever was good and excellent, a devoted mother, a staunch and sympathising friend’ and Keary as ‘a woman of great refinement, sensitive and accessible to all the finer emotions, but active and industrious,’ who ‘is essentially feminine, and seldom quits the sphere of domestic life.’ With these words, female writers are characteristically summarised as having been ideal angels of the home rather than distinguished women of letters.

This characteristic of Garnett’s articles runs against another policy of the *DNB*, which was articulated in lectures on the dictionary by Sidney Lee. He claimed that: the *DNB* should silently take for granted ‘the commonplace characteristics of existence’ such as ‘the everyday domestic virtues’; that ‘while the normal development of devotional sentiment or domestic virtues is in this connection immaterial, any departure from the normal development demands examination’ (‘National Biography’ 266-267). This policy partly results from his opinion that ‘[t]he aim of biography is not the moral edification which may flow from the survey of either vice or virtue’ (*Principles* 25-26). However, Garnett’s articles on female writers emphasise their moral virtues, which could be defined as ‘commonplace’ and ‘normal’ because these qualities were ideologically considered commonly innate in women. Moreover, the final metamorphosis of female writers into angels in the house impresses us that they are worthy of inclusion and celebration in the *DNB* because of their idealised femininity. If so, Garnett’s articles served to encourage the Victorian notion of the domestic angel and assisted in a sort of ‘moral edification.’

## 5. The Undervaluation of Women of Letters

The third characteristic of Garnett’s articles is their undervaluing of female writers. Baigent, Brewer & Larminie observe that women in the *DNB*, unlike men, had to be ‘good, not just talented,’ or in other words, not to be ‘both talented and bad’ (15). However, judging from Garnett’s descriptions of female writers, they were not allowed to be as talented as their male counterparts. This is very true of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851). The Mary Shelley depicted in Garnett’s article is not a distinguished, gifted author. Far from it, she is left in the shadows of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). According to the *DNB* article, during her husband’s lifetime ‘Mary Shelly was a hard student’ whose ‘history is almost absorbed in that of her illustrious husband.’ Her literary accomplishments in particular are subsumed under those of her husband. Garnett defines her authorial eminence as solely a result of her husband’s prominence, and so places the merit of Mary’s novels, such as *The Last Man* and *Lodore*, almost exclusively in their biographical accounts of P. B. Shelley:

‘The Last Man,’ published in 1826, though a remarkable book, is in no way apocalyptic, and wants the tremendous scenes which the subject might have suggested, the destruction of the human race being effected solely by pestilence. Passages, however, are exceedingly eloquent, and the portrait of Shelley as Adrian, drawn by one who knew him so well, has singular interest. Neither her historical novel, ‘Perkin Warbeck’ (1830), nor her latest fiction, ‘Falkner’ (1837), has much claim to remembrance; but ‘Lodore’ (1835) is remarkable for being, as Professor Dowden was the first to discern, a veiled autobiography. The whole story of the hero’s and heroine’s privations in London is a reminiscence of the winter of 1813.

Harriet Shelley [the abandoned wife of P. B. Shelley] appears much idealised as Cornelia, and her sister's baneful influence over her is impersonated in the figure of a mother-in-law, Lady Santerre. By it Lodore is driven to America, as Shelley to the continent. Emilia Viviani is also portrayed, probably with accuracy.

The intellectual powers of Mary, best exemplified in *Frankenstein*, are similarly credited to her husband: 'Mary undoubtedly received more than she gave. Nothing but an absolute magnetising of her brain by Shelley's can account for her having risen so far above her usual self as in "Frankenstein."' Additionally, the article conventionalises and domesticates her when it emphasises that 'her devotion to [her husband] was complete,' she did not show 'any neglect of domestic duties,' and her diaries were 'full of involuntary lamentations' after his death.

Garnett's article turns Mary Shelley from an independent and intellectual authoress to the passive helpmate of an ingenious and eminent poet, while worshipping the greatness of P. B. Shelley. This supports Betty T. Bennett's argument that 19th century biographers of Mary tended to portray themselves as confidants or true admirers of her great poet husband, and so focused on his talents at the expense of hers (x, xvi-xix). According to Bennett, this trend also arose because Mary's son and daughter-in-law, 'who controlled the vast stores of Shelley-Godwin circle manuscripts, had their own objective: completely idolising her, neither would book dissent' (ibid. xvi). The situation with the *DNB* article is similar. A poet himself, Richard Garnett greatly admired P. B. Shelley and wrote in his *DNB* article on P. B. Shelley the eulogy that 'no modern poet, unless it be Wordsworth, has so deeply influenced English poetry.' Besides, Garnett was favoured by Mary's bereaved children, who requested that he write the authorised biography of their parents. Very possibly this personal situation affected the way Garnett portrayed Mary.

However, there is another possible reason for Garnett's depreciation of Mary Shelley as author: his opinion that female writers were inherently inferior to male writers. This opinion discouraged him from using the same criteria when categorising male and female writers. For example, Dinah Maria Mulock's (1826-1887) masterpiece *John Halifax, Gentleman* is described as being an outstanding example among 'the works of female writers of the period,' while the lyrics of Sara Coleridge (1802-1852) entitle her to 'a highly respectable rank among English poetesses.' When female and male writers are compared, which happens rarely, the former are always surpassed in ability. This is exemplified by the case of Caroline Elizabeth Sarah Norton (1808-1877). Her poetical work *The Sorrows of Rosalie*, in Garnett's opinion, 'wants what Byron's verse did not want, the nameless something which makes poetry.' Garnett's assessment is gender-specific, and consequently, the limitations of the works of female writers are ascribed to the gender of their authors: 'Her diffuseness is the common fault of poetesses' ('Landon, Letitia Elizabeth, afterwards MRS. MACLEAN (1802-1838)'); her verse, 'like much feminine poetry, is over-fluent and deficient in concentration' ('Southey, MRS. Caroline Anne (1786-1854)'); 'she is, like most poetesses, purely subjective, and in no respect creative' ('Rossetti, Christina Georgiana (1830-1894)').

This gendered evaluation appears to be a reflection of an ideologically-biased view of female writers. Eric S. Robertson, one of Garnett's contemporaries, declared in his *English Poetesses* (1883) that: 'Women have always been inferior to men as writers of poetry; and they always will be' (xv). These words indicated that women of letters were generally ranked below men of letters in Victorian society. As Elaine Showalter explains, their secondary status can be traced to the Victorian notion that women were naturally intellectually inferior to men (*A Literature* 63-65). Garnett's equating of 'intellect' with 'masculine strength' in a *DNB* article ('Coleridge, Sara (1802-1852)') suggests that he believed in the ideologically-constructed differences between men and women. This belief might have led him to undervalue female writers.

## 6. Conclusion

In the late Victorian period, the patriarchal system was challenged and appeared to be under threat (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 6-7). This was also the time when Victorian gender norms were vigorously and publicly re-justified and enforced in order to defend and maintain the system (ibid. 3, 8). Post-Darwinian sexual science turned out to be a supporter of, or as Cynthia Eagle Russett writes, 'a key source of,' the defence against the perceived threat to the established, androcentric social order (191). In order to rationalise the perpetuation of traditional gendered roles and spheres along with men's dominance over women, the sexual sciences offered a detailed and sustained testimony on the differences between the sexes (ibid. 8-10). One of the differences most frequently emphasised was intelligence. With Garnett's articles affirming women's inherent intellectual inferiority as well as the separate spheres and the domestic angel, the *DNB* reflects the latter trend of the late Victorian period. Indeed, the *DNB* seems to have actively participated in the defence of Victorian patriarchy, as its articles went so far as to ignore its overall editorial policies in order to endorse these ideological notions.

Garnett's articles on female writers define the proper centre of a women's life as being the private rather than public sphere, and place value upon feminine domestic achievement rather than authorial public distinction. Moreover, his articles fundamentally regard the literary work of women as naturally inferior to that of men. Representing women of letters in this way illustrates Garnett's underlying perception that professional writing was unsuitable and improper vocation for women. Along with the rest of late Victorian literary society, he generally regarded women authors as nothing but amateurs.

However, it should be noted that Garnett was favourable to women's involvement in literature. As implied in the *Punch* cartoon (Fig. 1) discussed above, the admission (or intrusion, some would say) of women into the British Museum Reading Room as a public, intellectual, male-dominated space was often a subject of complaints or humour. In these circumstances, as Susan David Bernstein observes, Garnett served as 'an intentional and highly effective mentor for women writers' by giving advice about the library and the publishing industry and supplying links to other writers and publishers (76). A. Mary F. Robinson, the sole woman in the cartoon, was one of those he mentored (ibid. 78). Nonetheless, it was hard even for this supporter of female writers to take them as seriously as male writers. This fact demonstrates that to a great extent male writers were privileged in the literary world while female writers were underprivileged.

Significantly, the overall structure of the *DNB* institution also mirrors the phallogentric nature of the late Victorian literary world. The *DNB* had 696 contributors by 1901, only 45 of whom were women (Fenwick, *Women* 6). 37 of these female contributors made only minor contributions to a few articles, so pieces by women totalled no more than approximately 4.6% of the *DNB* articles (ibid. 6). This exclusion of women from the patriarchal institution founded by Leslie Stephen and then managed by Sidney Lee conveys the subjugated and belittled status of late Victorian female writers, along with the way Garnett described female writers.

## Note

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