Introduction by Howard Dodson

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|  | **Introduction** **African American Women Writers of the 19thCentury** Howard Dodson, Chief Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture The New York Public Library  The nineteenth century was a formative period in African-American literary and cultural history. Prior to the Civil War, the majority of black Americans living in the United States were held in bondage. Law and practice forbade teaching blacks from learning to read or write. Even after the war, many of the impediments to learning and literary productivity remained. Nevertheless, black men and women of the nineteenth century learned to both read and write. Moreover, more African-Americans than we yet realize turned their observations, feelings, social viewpoints, and creative impulses into published works. In time, this nineteenth-century printed record included poetry, short stories, histories, narratives, novels, autobiographies, social criticism, and theology, as well as economic and philosophical treatises. Unfortunately, much of this body of literature remained, until very recently, relatively inaccessible to twentieth-century scholars, teachers, creative artists, and others interested in black life. Prior to the late 1960s, most Americans (black as well as white) had never heard of these nineteenth-century authors, much less read their works.  The civil rights and black power movements created unprecedented interest in the thought, behavior, and achievements of black people. Publishers responded by revising traditional texts, introducing the American public to a generation of new African-American writers, publishing a variety of thematic anthologies, and reprinting a plethora of "classic texts" in African-American history, literature, and art. The reprints usually appeared as individual titles or in a series of bound volumes or microform formats.  The Schomburg Center, which has had a long history of supporting publishing projects on the history and culture of Africans in the diaspora, became an active participant in many of the reprint revivals of the 1960s. Since hard copies of original printed works were the preferred formats for producing facsimile reproductions, publishers frequently turned to the Schomburg Center for copies of these original titles. In addition to providing such materials, Schomburg Center staff members offered advice and consultation, wrote introductions, and occasionally entered into formal co-publishing arrangements in some projects.  Most of the nineteenth-century titles reprinted during the 1960s and 1970s, however, were by and about black men. A few black women were included in the longer series, but works by lesser-known black women were generally overlooked. The last two decades have witnessed an explosion of interest on writing by and about black women. In response to this interest, the Schomburg Center, in collaboration with Dr. Henry Louis Gates and Oxford University Press, published the thirty-volume *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers* in 1988. This collection is now out of print, but there is a continuing need to make works by 19th-century black women writers available to scholars, students and the general public alike. They constitute the foundations of the African American and African American women’s literary traditions, containing as they do, the first book of poetry by an African American (*Poems on Various Subjects, Religions and Moral* by Phillis Wheatly (1773); the first book of essays by an African American, *Essays* by Ann Plato (1841); and the first novel published by a black person in the United States, *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson (1859).  *African American Women Writers of the 19th Century* is a digital collection of some 52 published works by 19th-century black women writers. A part of the Digital Schomburg, this collection provides access to the thought, perspectives and creative abilities of black women as captured in books and pamphlets published prior to 1920. A full text database of these 19th and early 20th- century titles, this digital library is key-word-searchable. Each individual title as well as the entire database can be searched to determine what these women had to say about "family", "religion", "slavery" or any other subject of interest to the researcher or casual reader. The Schomburg Center is pleased to make this historic resource available to the public.  [6/9/98] |