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To their contemporaries, nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second. The new questions of women's place in literature proved endlessly fascinating, and the Victorians approached them with all the weight of their religious commitments and their interest in the sciences of human nature. As one historian explains: "From early childhood, girls were taught self-effacement and modesty, were encouraged to feel shame about their bodies, and were advised to try to 'hide' the natural conditions of menstruation and pregnancy. The single woman of the middle-class was forced to deceit if she was to taste any of the freedom of knowledge given her brothers."