



Victorian Poetry in Context, by Rosie Miles.

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When I agreed to review Rosie Miles's *Victorian Poetry in Context*, the latest in Bloomsbury's Texts and Contexts series that aims to provide clear and accessible introductions to key literary texts, I hoped vaguely that the book would refresh my memory of some of the fundamental ideas about nineteenth-century poetry that I encountered as an undergraduate. What I did *not* expect was to discover such an entertaining, refreshing, and genuinely informative book that has reinvigorated my appreciation of Victorian poetry and sent me running to my poetry bookshelf with a renewed hunger.

Miles's extensive knowledge and sophisticated understanding of Victorian poetry is clearly evident in every section of the book. She manages to balance a survey of the canonical poems of the era (by Tennyson, Browning, Barrett Browning, and the Rossettis) with a liberal selection of less well-known works by *fin-de-siècle* poets and more "minor" poets. Attention to the work of women poets is also skilfully woven throughout the volume, rather than being relegated to a section of its own. The result is a book that amply serves its stated purpose – introducing students to the poetry of the Victorian era that they are most likely to encounter during their degree courses – while also giving a sense of up-to-date scholarship, ongoing debates, and emerging fields that will define work on poetry to come. Victorian poetry feels very much alive in this book.

The first two sections (Part One) set out several key contexts for Victorian poetry. "Social and Cultural Contexts" briefly outlines the significance of gender, faith, science, Empire, and the Industrial Revolution to nineteenth-century poetry. "Literary Contexts" then delineates the relationship between Victorian and Romantic poetics, the seemingly diminished role of poetry in comparison with other forms such as the novel, and important innovations such as the dramatic monologue and the illustrated book. Each chapter is followed by helpful suggestions for further reading and thought-provoking research questions for students to ponder.

The central section (Part Two) deals with the key texts themselves. First is Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Miles discusses the form of Tennyson's verses in relation to grief and repetition, and the conventions of elegy. She then explores faith, doubt, and Darwinism, before looking at queer critical readings of the elegaic sequence. The next chapter focuses on Robert Browning and the dramatic monologue, including "Porphyria's Lover" and "The Last Duchess," arguing that Browning's ability to enter another's consciousness and seduce the reader into following their logic gives his work a "dangerous edge" (70).

Following this, Miles provides a very useful account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, arguing that in this epic poem, Barrett Browning articulates her belief in the central role the poet plays in the improvement of society (and the ways that a woman can attain such poetic authority). The next chapter deals with a very different woman poet – the enigmatic Christina Rossetti. This chapter, along with the following section on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is one of the strongest in the book. Miles manages to simultaneously survey a daunting range of critical readings on "Goblin Market," offer close analysis of Rossetti's form and metre, and place the poem in the context of Pre-Raphaelite illustration. Likewise, her chapter on

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny" productively sets the poem in the context of Rossetti's artistic productions (specifically "Found") and places it in stark relief with Augusta Webster's stunning monologue, "A Castaway."

The final "text" discussed is *fin-de-siècle* poetry. It is regrettable that, for reasons of length no doubt, Miles could not afford the same attention to specific poets of this era as in the other chapters. Still, the late-Victorian section manages to be both rich and suggestive, giving a sense of the boom in scholarship in this area that has taken place since the 1990s. Miles singles out Amy Levy and Arthur Symonds for attention, but links their overall themes (the city, alienation, sexuality, and desire) to the preoccupations of late-Victorian poetry more generally.

The final section (Part Three) reviews the main critical contexts for Victorian poetry from the 1950s to today before outlining some afterlives and adaptations of Victorian poetic texts. This last section is both enormous fun and, in a critical sense, highly original and relevant. As Miles herself notes, while neo-Victorian studies has "mostly been concerned with the novel rather than poetry" (167), she offers a quick run-through of examples of the enduring legacies of Victorian poetry in contemporary literary (and popular) contexts. These (often amusing) examples clearly prove that further study of neo-Victorian poetic legacies would yield fascinating results.

In conclusion, I heartily recommend *Victorian Poetry in Context* to its target audience, undergraduates, but also to postgraduates and established scholars alike. The book manages to feel extremely rich and suggestive, while it is also – in part due to Miles's clear and accessible style – an enjoyable and effortless read. It is much more than a trudging survey of canonical texts; instead, Miles offers us a diverse smorgasbord of Victorian poetic texts and their varied critical contexts which inspires further investigation.

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