

***Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting*, by Pamela Gerrish Nunn. Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press / Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1995.**

Pamela Gerrish Nunn has added a new dimension to her earlier research into the difficult professional lives of Victorian women painters, and into their achievements despite restraints. The comprehensive knowledge of exhibiting and training opportunities and of individual careers which made Nunn's earlier work so informative here contribute to answering another question: what are Victorian paintings about? Nunn's thesis, explored through chapters on different themes and sub-genres in painting, is that the fundamental challenge posed by the "woman question" should contribute to our construing of "any Victorian picture that involved women and men in its making or its content."

As the book progresses, it becomes clear that some topics offer more angles on this thesis than others. The chapter about flower painting ("a sub-category of the lowest genre in the hierarchy, still-life") has much to say about male reactions when females looked as if they might win dominance in the once-despised area, but does not attempt comments on gender relations exemplified by bowls of azaleas. Not that the Victorian symbolic association of flowers and females is not interesting in itself—there is a good account of it in this chapter. Nunn's record of the power-struggle over the genre is new and fascinating. The paintings she reproduces (illustrations are in black and white only, unfortunately) are impressively lovely. But other themes, like the troubled heterosexual couple, and other genres, like history painting, are richer sources for Nunn's commentary on gender issues.

The first chapter, which situates Victorian painting in various social contexts, deals with Victorian artists' self-promotion through representations of themselves and their distinguished forebears at work—even representations of themselves as their famous forebears at work. In marketing their profession painters faced a number of other challenges (photography, mechanised reproduction, the changing nature of private patronage, the general commodification of art) as well as the phenomenon of the professional female artist. Nunn has sharp things to say about male self-aggrandisement (some of which certainly takes almost touchingly naive forms of self-glorification) but does not properly explain how the obsession with the male artist/female model as pictorial subject—artists, of course, also commonly worked with male models—should be seen as a particularly Victorian response to a contemporary social challenge. The male subject/female object, male artist/female muse is surely a long-lived Western European obsession.

Subsequent chapters deal with the depiction of failure in romance and marriage, with images of the Indian Mutiny, with female "domestication" of historical subjects, and with emigration. Finally, there is a chapter on the classical revival—or, more specifically, on the culturally confusing entry of women painters into an already controversial domain: depiction of the female nude. The general impression is not so much just of an obstacle race, but of an obstacle race run in hobbles. Women aspiring to the higher genres lacked not only book-learning, technical expertise, and collegial relations with other artists, but also often money, confidence, and time. Their canvasses were mostly smaller than men's (they still are, apparently), and at exhibitions were usually hung high up or low down on the wall. Advice to women painters from even well-meaning sources, such as the feminist *Englishwoman's Review*, must have been

discouraging in the extreme: "It may be that in the more heroic and epic works of art the hand of man is best fitted to excel; nevertheless there remain gentle scenes of home interest, and domestic care, delineations of refined feeling and subtle touches of tender emotion, with which the woman-artist is eminently entitled to deal."

Women who "ventured beyond flowers, fruit and landscapes" therefore ran the risk of being seen to say the wrong thing. This danger was particularly present in historical painting, then the highest genre, since the mythologies and morals of the past, as Nunn shows, were very different for women than for men. Even a fundamentally conservative painter like Henrietta Ward—whose work was often acknowledged as genuine "high art" by critics—managed to get it wrong with *Elizabeth Fry at Newgate* (1876). Among other hostile critics the *Spectator* remarked that "the story is well told, were it worth the telling, which is, perhaps, doubtful." Nunn proffers a number of suggestions as to why the picture misfired: because the Quakers had a political reputation, because Fry had a public identity, because she was depicted outside the home (and not as a mother), and because the Newgate setting invoked Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress*, which indicated an unacceptable amount of ambitious emulation in Henrietta Ward. But in fact women artists operated in a series of double-binds. Depiction of (say) motherhood rather than fatherhood won praise for its appropriate femininity but lost points for dealing with a second-class subject, whereas showing Charles I as a father diminished neither Charles I nor Daniel Maclise. Expressing important public events through the medium of women's experience—see Jessie McGregor's *News from Trafalgar* (1893) or Anna Lea Merritt's *War* (1883)—allowed critics to point out that women's history painting lacked the epic importance of men's. Nevertheless women's emergence—modest as it was—in "high" art, clearly did especially infuriate and frighten male painters. Some cruel and irrational attacks followed female success.

The pictures selected by Nunn to illustrate her topics (not all are paintings) include many not often reproduced. The chapter on emigration, especially interesting to Australasian readers, includes Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England*, of course, but also a Marshall Claxton painting from the National Gallery of Victoria, *An Emigrant's Thoughts of Home* (1859). Claxton, whose own not entirely successful emigration to Australia Nunn records in some detail, took as his subject a solitary female on shipboard, in plain working woman's dress who makes respectable, in Nunn's view, a controversial figure. Emigration of single females indicated in many minds their fallen state, but this figure is a satisfactory vehicle for the projection of a bundle of emotions by an 1860s audience: "on the one hand regret, fear, nostalgia, loss, sorrow and on the other hope, relief, excitement." Female figures, even in crowded family emigration scenes, often carry the emotional burden of unhappiness, anxiety and loss implied by the subject. In general, art history of the period hardly acknowledges the female painter. Nunn shows that gender difference and male/female rivalry in the profession cannot be disregarded in the analysis of Victorian pictures.

**Rose Lovell-Smith**

---