

Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity*.

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Triangulating the shifting definitions of work, gender, and culture in his excellent, in-depth, discussion of their changing terminology and evolving ideological investment in the course of the nineteenth century, Martin Danahay's study offers an important reassessment of Victorian concepts of work, of industry and industrialisation, energy and enterprise. It is a probing analysis of their cultural significance as well as of their fissures and contradictions within a changing division of labour along class and gender lines. Although *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* thus concentrates primarily on the repercussions this conceptualisation had on emergent instabilities of masculine identity at the time, it simultaneously casts a very different light on hitherto little explored problematics that were deeply ingrained in the class-based demarcations of labour. They significantly manifested themselves in divergent ways within the paralleled gender paradigms of different class strata. A seminal contribution to what Danahay describes as the second wave of "masculinity studies" (3), his book is hence as important to a much needed reevaluation of gentility, perhaps the central and most vexed concept in mid-Victorian middle-class self-definition, as to the changing perception of the new leisure industry and the growing cultural pre-eminence of white-collar occupations. What is therefore an essentially twofold cultural history of the gender and class alignment of mainstream (middle-class) considerations of labour in British society and culture as it evolved in the latter half of the nineteenth century is held together precisely through its focus on the ideological contradictions surrounding the definition of "work" and especially "man's work" at large. Thus, the class hierarchy associated with working can be seen to manifest itself both in the feminisation of intellectual or artistic pursuits and in the equally distorting romanticisation of working-class, or manual, labour.

Using a photography of Arthur Munby as a compelling point of entry into his exploration of this essentially fissured representation of both men and women "at work," Danahay proceeds to draw on works as different as the fiction of Dickens and Gissing, the non-fictional prose of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris, the poetry of Thomas Hood, paintings by Richard Redgrave, William Bell Scott, and Ford Madox Brown, as well as remarkable findings in the Munby collection. In concentrating on the schisms in middle-class masculinity, these intriguingly diverse readings of Victorian cultural productions insistently – and this is most important in this cultural analysis – revolve back to what was indeed a pivotal question at the time itself: the changing understanding of a gentleman's identity. This was despite the fact that its interconnectedness with much broader cultural, socioeconomic, and political issues was often sublimated in the literature and art of the time. "All the men studied in this book," Danahay stresses early on as his dual approach unfolds, "possessed what in contemporary terms would be called 'cultural capital.'" (11). It was frequently at odds with actual financial resources. Danahay mentions Ford Madox Brown, who worked in oil painting, while his family was recurrently in financial distress. Such discrepancies in the collapsing divisions between manual and intellectual labour, high and low art, financial and social resources, cultural and other forms of capital, help to reveal and engender the dichotomies and ambiguities that structure some of the most self-reflexive literary and artistic works of the age.

An insightful analysis of Carlyle's assertion of the nobility of cotton spinning and further an "Aristocracy of Labour" in *Past and Present* and likewise of Samuel Smiles's notorious condemnation of the aristocracy's major activities as limited to leisure in *Life and Labour* and *Self-Help* redirects attention to the inherent fissures in the Victorian idea of "the Gospel of Work." Yet it also makes way quickly for the central critique of a "gendering" of work. This at once widens the discussion of gentility and sets gender issues firmly in the foreground. Thus, in considering poetry and paintings of the 1840s side by side, Danahay illustrates how the representation of women in Redgrave's *The Seamstress* and *The Poor Teacher*, for example, "mark a crucial stage in the Victorian redefinition of 'work' as masculine and as fatal for women" (50). Juxtaposed with the iconic significance of the seamstress, the governess moreover suggests a cross-class projection of sympathy that tantalisingly points at a possible extension of Danahay's argument. Both paintings present "genteel" poverty that may distort Redgrave's original intention to expose the plight of the working classes by depicting them instead symbolically as members of middle-class families, but at the same time, this very absorption effectively articulates the most vexed cultural and social discrepancies along gender lines (53-54). What denotes the act of sewing as "work" is, after all, exactly its status as labour that is "carried out for money on behalf of people outside of the family" (55).

Danahay then follows this line of argumentation further in the new reading he compellingly suggests of Esther Summerson's occupation as a "manager" of households in Dickens's *Bleak House*. This is perhaps the most intriguing exploration of the overlapping gender and class demarcations and their successive realignment in nineteenth-century ideologies of labour. Whereas a depiction of Esther as a working woman might threaten to masculinise her, her apparently inherent aptitude to look after children and the homes that house them naturalises even her "managerial role" (83). In connection with the central conceptualisation of "men's work" in the nineteenth century, such skirting of the professionalisation of women (beyond governesses as "decayed gentlewomen"), however, not only forms the other side of the coin to the feminised artistic or intellectual male worker. By the end of the century, Danahay emphasises in his concluding discussion of Gissing's *New Grub Street*, it was feminised men, not working-class women, who were shown to be killed through (intellectual) work. The gendering of professionalisation had undergone a succession of twists and turns that eventually produced new opportunities for representations of both men and women "at work."

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