

Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

Catherine Delafield. *The Nineteenth Century Series*, ed. by Vincent Newey and Joanne Shattock. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. 191pp.
ISBN: 978-0-7546-6517-5

Women, Portraiture and the Crisis of Identity in Victorian England: My Lady Scandalous Reconsidered

Colleen Denney. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. 260pp.
ISBN: 978-0-7546-6879-4

Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism

Christine Bayles Kortsch. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. 201pp.
ISBN: 978-0-7546-6510-6

Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture

Galia Ofek. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. 271pp.
ISBN: 978-0-7546-6161-0

If the focus of these four publications is any indication, academic interest in investigating Victorian women's 'crisis of identity', to use Colleen Denney's phrase, is undergoing a resurgence. Each of these studies is representative of Ashgate's stated emphasis on publishing specialised academic research. Denney, Catherine Delafield, Christine Bayles Kortsch, and Galia Ofek all address the construction of gender identity in Victorian literature in relation to the operation of power relations in nineteenth-century culture. For Denney, Ofek, and Kortsch, this is explored in terms of the visual representation of women: the fetishisation, the performance, the framing, and the dressing of the female body. These generously illustrated works read the sociocultural discourses of hair, textiles, and portraits in terms of the Victorian preoccupation with constructing identity, particularly insofar as that identity describes the limitations placed upon women of the period. Thus, for Ofek, hair becomes a text which can be read in terms of (high and low) cultural and religious significance; but more than this, the repetition (or performance) of such 'semiotic fetishism' in nineteenth-century culture, she argues, forms an image-making process through which the ideal of Victorian femininity was constructed. In Kortsch's study, it is textiles – both clothes and household items – which describe a culturally-recognisable image; here, however, these are texts to be read, most often, by other women.

What is perhaps most interesting about these studies, and most clearly comes to the fore in Denney's research, is that images or visual representations of women can be seen as simultaneously reinforcing and undermining Victorian ideals of gender identity. Thus, for Denney, the portraits of Victorian female professionals (even 'celebrities') – Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Lady Dilke, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, and Sarah Grand – become at once a reiteration of idealised Victorian female identity, and an opportunity for such women to (visually) invent or perform themselves. Indeed, as Denney points out, to have one's portrait painted denotes one's importance; that these women were celebrated enough to sit for a portrait is itself a transgressive idea. The two sections of Denney's study are powerfully and effectively structured around these twin poles of persuasion and resistance; a concluding chapter reads these together through the work of Oscar Wilde who, for Denney, is a cultural critic particularly well situated to read these inflections of gender and performance.

It is the subversive power of women to control how they are read with which Delafield and Kortsch also inflect their studies. For Delafield and Kortsch, it is in the potentially dissident spaces of women's writing – the (usually) private and domesticated diary and the embroidery sampler – that female identity can be reclaimed and self-defined. Thus, for Kortsch, a Victorian female education in sewing means that women possess a high cultural capital in terms of their 'dual literacy' in literary culture and material culture. And literacy in dress culture, she argues, should not be construed as oppressive, or as placing limitations on the potential for women to produce readable texts, but rather as an indication of female knowledge and creative power. Perhaps even more importantly, such a model of female literacy does not separate high and low culture, and thus incorporates the creative and literate labour of working-class seamstresses.

Delafield performs a similar reclamation of women's work in her reading of fictional and non-fictional diaries, so that the diary becomes what the author terms a 'second self', an ironically culturally sanctioned space in which 'real life' can take place, outside of the restrictions of Victorian femininity and domesticity, which in turn becomes the performance. When the diary becomes public and authoritative – as it does in the case of Fanny Burney's *Diary*, or even a published work of fiction which makes use of the diary as a literary device – it comes into conflict with its ideologically approved role in the private space of the Victorian home.

Each of these studies is fascinating, well-researched, and detailed, even if they all, at times, tend to lapse into a conservative reading of the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres. Delafield, Ofek, Kortsch and, especially, Denney, have produced careful and elegant investigations of Victorian literature and culture as it worked to produce female identity. To frame this in terms of the 'private/public' binary addressed by a traditional literary critical framework itself originally produced during the major feminist revisionist projects of the 1980s seems, to some degree, to work against the transgression and subversion advocated by these studies. That aside, these are all valuable pieces of research that contribute to the wider field of gender studies in Victorian literature and culture.

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