

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

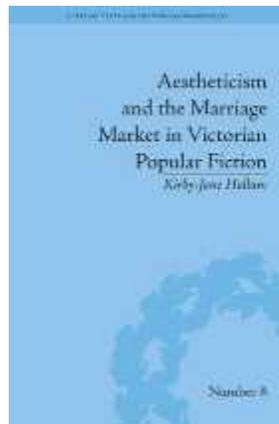
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Special Issue:

Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

Guest Edited by Lara Karpenko and Lauri Dietz

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Beautiful Objects of Exchange

[*Aestheticism and the Marriage Market in Victorian Popular Fiction: The Art of Female Beauty*](#). Kirby-Jane Hallum. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015. 217 pp.

Reviewed by [Tamar Heller](#), University of Cincinnati

No reader of Victorian fiction — especially no feminist reader — can help but notice the ubiquitous plot of women marrying for money. In *Aestheticism and the Marriage Market in Victorian Popular Fiction*, Kirby-Jane Hallum situates this familiar narrative in the context of British aestheticism and its images of women as beautiful objects. Drawing on the work of such feminist scholars as Talia Schaffer and Kathy Psomiades, Hallum contributes to the study of gender and aestheticism by examining the influence of the movement, in its various late-Victorian permutations, on literary representations of the economics of marriage. Reading five novels by popular Victorian writers — Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879), Ouida's *Moths* (1880), Marie Corelli's *Wormwood* (1890), and George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) — Hallum argues that they depict women as both commodities and cultural capital, elegant bodies to be purchased by the highest bidder

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and then displayed. Although the writers Hallum examines occupy a range of ideological positions — some more feminist than others in their portrayal of marriage as (in Mary Wollstonecraft's term) "legal prostitution"⁽¹⁾ — all five portray the economic and aesthetic objectification of women as problematic.

<2>In addition to offering an original interpretation of the marriage plot in Victorian fiction, Hallum's study, the eighth volume in Pickering & Chatto's series *Literary Texts and the Popular Marketplace*, provides useful re-evaluations of the popular, but now critically under-read, works it addresses. As a Broughton scholar, I was particularly happy that Hallum devotes her first chapter to Broughton's early novel (classified as sensation fiction), *Cometh Up as a Flower*. An ideal text to support Hallum's claims about the "aesthetic commodification of women" (39), *Cometh Up* details the tragic fate of a young woman — a Pre-Raphaelite stunner — whose romance with a handsome soldier is derailed when she marries a wealthy man for the sake of her bankrupt father. Significantly, the "mastermind" (38) who pushes the reluctant Nell into Sir Hugh Lancaster's arms is her sister, Dolly, an enthusiastic proponent of mercenary marriage whose name aptly conveys her association with an artificial version of femininity. In her discussion of Nell's predicament, Hallum identifies a binary that she will also note in subsequent texts she analyzes: the dichotomy between the heroine's innocent, Romantic embodiment of nature and the corrupting inauthenticity of the marriage market she is forced to enter. Bitterly aware that her aristocratic husband has "paid down a handsome price" for "so many pounds of prime white flesh" (qtd. in Hallum 38), Nell transforms from wild child to collector's object. Her only escape from the aesthetically pleasing body which, like her marriage, has become a prison, is death, in her case the result of consumption (Hallum reminds us that Nell's wasted body also suggests the self-inflicted ravages of anorexia, first identified as a disease in the late 1860s.)

<3> Hallum's second and third chapters, on Meredith's *The Egoist* and Ouida's *Moths* respectively, examine plots which resemble Broughton's in having an aristocrat select a beautiful and innocent woman as marriage partner. The cheeriest example of this narrative among Hallum's texts, *The Egoist* traces the failed attempt of the effete Sir Willoughby Patterne — his name alluding to the aesthetic craze for Blue Willow china — to add Clara Middleton to his collection of beautiful objects. In this chapter Hallum expands the scope of her argument to claim that Darwin's theories are also an influence on Meredith's novel; in an "obvious misapprehension" of the concept of natural selection (73), Sir Willoughby believes himself superior to Clara's other suitors. Fortunately for herself, she evades Sir Willoughby's clutches to make a love-match with a man symbolically associated with beneficent nature.

<4>A similar happy ending is only achieved in Ouida's *Moths*, however, after the widowed heroine survives a fearful ordeal as wife of the sinister aesthete Prince Zouroff. *Moths* is well suited to Hallum's dual focus on art and economics. Not only is the novel a scathing critique of the marriage market, but it is strongly marked by the influence of aestheticism; indeed, as Hallum notes, Ouida is now considered "one of the founders of the aesthetic novel" (77). Laden with lush images of woman as artwork, *Moths* teeters uneasily, as do many of the books under discussion, between condemning this objectification and luxuriating in it. Still, among the novel's more feminist aspects is its critique of marital rape (the Gothic Zouroff may outdo in sadism even Grandcourt in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* [1876] and Gilbert Osmond in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* [1881]). Through Zouroff, Hallum also addresses commodity fetishism, linking it to an issue she raised in her chapter on *The Egoist*: the Victorian

perception of women as eroticized children. Chillingly, Zouroff, like Sir Willoughby, prefers a wife whose child-like purity signals her availability for sexual domination and “exclusive ownership” (90): “[a]lthough the valuing of the virgin bride is an ancient social idea, both Ouida and Meredith introduce this primordial preference through a new discourse of commodity culture” (91). Hallum’s perceptive reading of connoisseurship and erotic commerce in *Moths* — a novel that definitely deserves higher visibility among Victorianists — made this third chapter my favorite.

<5>Both of the novels that Hallum considers in her last two chapters ally aestheticism with those bugbears of the fin-de-siècle period in which they were published: decadence and degeneration. Chapter Four, on Corelli’s *Wormwood*, traces its attack on such “perceived social threats” (102) as French influence and increased secularism in a cautionary tale of a wealthy absinthe addict who drives his fiancée to suicide, murders the man she loves, and obsessively pursues another beautiful woman. Despite its “self-righteous” (102) condemnation of decadence, however, *Wormwood* is steeped in characteristically decadent imagery, including “the aestheticization of the dead female body” (104). *Trilby* (1894), the subject of Chapter Five and probably the best known today of the works Hallum addresses, portrays the Paris art scene from the 1850s through that heyday of aestheticism, the 1890s. In *Trilby*, the eponymous artist’s model who falls under the sway of the mesmerist Svengali, Du Maurier creates a memorable image of woman as, simultaneously, fetishized artwork and commodified artist. Hallum ends her study with a brief reading of Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908), a modernist text that repeats many of the plot motifs of the earlier works she examines. Allowing the beautiful Lucy to avoid a stultifying marriage with an aesthete, however, Forster “synthesize[s] art, nature, beauty and love in a way the other novels in this study were not yet able to do” (174).

<6>Overall, I found Hallum’s study valuable, though I had several criticisms. She can be digressive (her introduction, for instance, includes information on writers’ lives and general background on popular fiction that could largely be cut). I felt, too, that the first three texts she examines are better suited to a discussion of the marriage market than the final two, *Wormwood* and *Trilby*, which, while they include marvelous examples of the aesthetic objectification of women, are not as obviously about mercenary marriage as the other books. (To illustrate the relevance of Corelli’s essay “The Modern Marriage Market” [1897] to her fiction, Hallum relies less on *Wormwood* than on *The Sorrows of Satan* [1895].) I would also have appreciated further discussion of the class politics of the novels in question, particularly of how they, like so many Victorian texts, negatively portray the aristocracy in order to celebrate the middle class (a motif which, however, ignores the commodification of women in bourgeois as well as aristocratic marriage). In general, though, Hallum’s study has much to recommend it to those interested in the study of gender, aestheticism, commodity culture, and popular writers and genres in the Victorian period.

Endnotes

(1) Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: Norton, 1988), 148. [^](#)