

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 2.2 (SUMMER 2006)



Fragmenting the Female Voice: Restrictive Imperial Discourse and the New Woman Movement

The New Woman and the Empire. Iveta Jusová. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005. vii + 221 pp.

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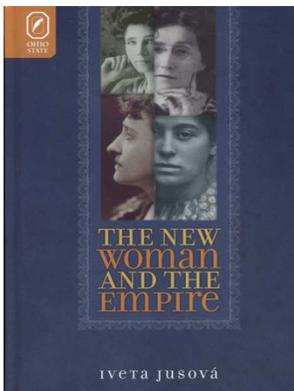
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<1> Iveta Jusová's compelling new book advances the study of proto-feminism in the fin de siècle through the examination of four New Women authors, concentrating on culturally dissimilar women whose works and lives reveal unique entanglements with late nineteenth-century empire. Jusová's study combines further interpretation of two well-studied figures, the British Sarah Grand and the Anglo-Irish George Egerton with chapters on two relative newcomers to New Woman scholarship, the Anglo-American Elizabeth Robins and the Anglo-Jewish Amy Levy. Jusová highlights how the cross-genre work of the four women represents an uneven attitude toward imperialist ideology and colonial practice. Demonstrating that the presence of imperialist rhetoric in the New Woman movement stemmed from personal as well as political motivations, Jusová investigates the myriad ways in which empire became a consistent component limiting the supposed radicalism of the New Woman. From the study of Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* to Levy's feminist poem "Xantippe," the goal of Jusová's book is to reveal how the rhetoric of imperialism undermined the intended oppositionality of the movement in which these authors participated.

<2> As Jusová herself points out, the fin de siècle's omnipresent preoccupation with empire is, by now, familiar to scholars of the period. The merit of her study thus lies in its showing the marginalization of the colonial figure in the work of authors who are regarded as the foremothers of modern feminism. Jusová offers a novel approach to the subject through her attentive close readings and ample theoretical contextualization. Indeed, a key strength of the book is the commitment to integrating a wide range of postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist theories. This method enables Jusová to locate multiple sites of narrative contradiction and limitations in the texts considered. Adding insight to the interpretation of the British novelist Sarah Grand, Jusová opens her book with a chapter dedicated to exploring the integration of "scientific racism" in the work of the author who is often seen to typify the New Woman (8). In *The Heavenly Twins* and *The Beth Book*, Grand's depiction of ideal, aristocratic women who fail to succeed despite the advantages of their class position demonstrates the crushing weight of traditional society. Grand's female characters are transformed from progressive young women to silenced wives and mothers. But Grand also imbues her characters with racial and congenital superiority. Made by nature to prosper, her socially and evolutionarily advanced heroines attempt to resist society's tendency to stifle female agency. According to Jusová, Grand's support for evolutionary theory and her abiding interest in maintaining empire superseded the desire to show the detrimental effects of female suppression. Grand's inability to break with pseudo-scientific imperialist rhetoric thus weakened her advocacy of gender equality. Though Grand was not ostensibly devoted to supporting the empire, her reliance on authoritative imperial discourse ultimately negated the progressive political aims she sought to validate.

<3> In her chapter on Grand and throughout the book, the complication of Foucault's term "biopower," as considered by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather* (1995) and Ann Laura Stoler in *Race and Education of Desire* (1995), provides the main theoretical background to Jusová's study. Biopower is the scientific and technological control of humanity and knowledge and, in late nineteenth-century Britain, was manifested in Eurocentric and racist notions of evolution, decadence, and eugenics. Noting that "the evolutionary discourse enlisted the Victorian ideal of ascetic, self-disciplined femininity for the purposes of the English bourgeois nation and the British Empire," Jusová explores how each of the women she studies was immersed in the popular scientific theories that underwrote late-Victorian imperialism (9). The codification of



gender roles and scientific categorization intrinsic to British imperial culture, evidenced in Grand's use of social Darwinism in her efforts on behalf of female equality, is similarly seen in the dramatic performances and writings of the Anglo-American Elizabeth Robins. Like Grand, Robins sought to validate her fight for self-determination by providing a racial justification for the emancipation of European women. While Robins was personally invested in revealing the bleak influence biological determinism had upon the lives of individual women (as the daughter of an institutionalized mother), her rationalization of imperialism was rooted in hierarchical evolutionary rhetoric. In her travelogue *Under the Southern Cross* and novel *The Open Question*, Robins was committed to criticizing institutions and patriarchal systems that shut off venues of female subjectivity. Yet her censures consistently allied British women with imperial biopower. In her performance and staging of Ibsen plays, Robins sought to codify the "existentialist challenge" Ibsen's plays posed to fin de siècle scientific discourse (103). Jusová argues that Robins sought to avoid potential misinterpretation of Ibsen's female characters by diminishing the ambiguity of his dramas and directing the audience's interpretation. Despite coming from a former British colony, Robins was an "Anglo-American cultural nationalist," whose advocacy of British feminism was invested in directing her audience to recognize the right of the privileged white woman to direct her own life (120).

<4> Jusová's attempt to fix these New Women authors within a broad colonial context is most valuable in her chapters on George Egerton and Amy Levy. While Grand and Robins attempted to manipulate commanding imperial discourse to validate their own political ambitions, Levy and Egerton sought to distance themselves from the seemingly pathological support for empire in late-Victorian culture. Rather than constructing their political identities within the discourse of patriarchal imperialism, Levy's and Egerton's contempt for British society enabled them to adopt more liberating "discursive strategies" (179). In her study of Egerton, Jusová extends Laura Chrisman's work by redirecting scholarly focus on Egerton's sexual liberalism to a discussion of class and race. As the recipient of a liberal German education, Egerton made her distaste for conventional English femininity and morality a mainstay of her work. Though revealing an oscillating relationship to her own Anglo-Irish "race," Egerton's selective application of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy to her articulation of universal female subjectivity freed her, to some extent, from hegemonic attitudes toward evolution and the female body. Egerton's interest in portraying the shared experience of females, a theme running throughout *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894), supersedes her interest in hierarchical boundaries. This opens the possibility of a cohesive female community apart from, and critical of, male categorizations of community and female identity. Yet, according to Jusová, even such attempted detachment from mainstream attitudes to empire ultimately reinforced the traditional hierarchies of imperialist rhetoric. Egerton's heroines, such as Fruen in "The Regeneration of Two," are established in their own elemental, primitive "nature" as they separate from patriarchal society (52). Ultimately, Jusová believes Egerton was limited by her essentializing depiction of womanhood, which, though detached from male definitions of female identity, still had recall to a fundamental ideal of femininity.

<5> Breaking from traditional depictions of femininity was also a key interest of Amy Levy's work. Jusová's chapter on Levy is by far the most productive: as an Anglo-Jew, Levy's identity was the most threatened by the late-Victorian intensification of xenophobic and eugenic rhetoric. In her poetry, Levy elevates the personal subjective experience in order to carve out a space for female identity independent of the collective interests of the nation. Levy's protestation of her double marginalization—as a woman and a Jew—inspired her refusal of the discourse of degeneracy and standards depictions of intellectual females. Jusová reads the female protagonist of "Xantippe," a dramatic monologue, as a latter-day Dorothea Casaubon, who has both the earnest desire and ability to attain education, but is inhibited by her marriage. Drawing on the scholarship of Linda Hutcheon to appreciate the subversive power of irony in Levy's fiction, Jusová compellingly reads *Reuben Sachs* as an ironic tour de force. Levy's identification with, and desire to be distanced from, British nationality was displayed in her parodic deployment of domestic fiction. Nevertheless, by constantly trivializing and calling up stereotypical characterizations, Levy curtailed her ability to break free from prevalent discourse.

<6> Jusová argues that the subaltern perspectives and inability to escape the patriarchal interpretative language that dictated their imperial attitudes unites the work of Grand, Egerton, Robins, and Levy. Jusová thoroughly contextualizes each within the frame of her own political goals and her specific cultural ethos. This organization enhances the sense of each woman's unique negotiation with, and individual experience of, empire; but such nuance comes at the expense of a more coherent analysis of the goals of the New Woman movement. Jusová's single-

...ence of a more consistent analysis of the goals of the New Woman movement. Jusová's single-minded attention to exploring the author's investment in articulating and negotiating her public identity does little to develop a dialogue between the women. With few comparative threads connecting the authors, the article-like chapters do not fit well together in a book form. In applying the same set of questions to each of the authors, Jusová's focus on these four seems arbitrary, and their dissimilarity does little to justify her selection for a representative study. Moreover, Jusová places the women so well into their particular imperialist-inflected communities that she leaves herself unable to suggest their common identification with an overarching "Anglo" femininity, let alone identification with late Victorian feminism. Nonetheless, exploring the diversity of the New Woman is an important part of understanding the movement and Jusová does convincingly argue, albeit only in conclusion, that her non-comparative study represents the "careful splitting of those women who managed to represent themselves as deserving of emancipation from those other women...presumably not worth the imperial nation's consideration" (180).

<7> Jusová's difficulty in unifying her study is heightened by the passive mode of her writing. Jusová amply contextualizes her study with previous theoretical and scholarly work, but does so to the detriment of her own individuated prose style. Despite this, Jusová's carefully researched and assiduous close reading of individual works is most valuable. Her investigation of important limitations within the New Woman movement is a commendable addition to our understanding of the multifarious female voices in fin-de-siècle Britain. *The New Woman and the Empire* expands the critical interpretation of the New Woman movement, viewing the enterprise not only as a forerunner to twentieth century feminism, but also as a movement beholden to nineteenth century imperialist discourse.