

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Between Friends, Sodomites, and Semites: A New Look at Victorian Democracy

*Friendship's Bonds: Democracy and the Novel in Victorian England*. Richard Dellamora. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 252 pp.

Reviewed by [David Hennessee](#), California Polytechnic State University

<1> “This is what democracy looks like.” The familiar protest slogan suggests a transparently simple and straightforward vision of democracy: like-minded individuals in solidarity against an oppressive power regime. The picture of democracy presented in Richard Dellamora’s latest book more closely resembles a haunted house crossed with a hall of mirrors. Democracy seems such a simple concept: the citizenry participates in its own governance. But who counts as a citizen? In grappling with this question, the Victorians grudgingly expanded the franchise to include Catholics, Dissenters, Jews, the Irish, middle and eventually working-class men—and they did think about including women. *Friendship's Bonds* shows how debates over this egalitarian trend often faltered over whether to exclude “Others” from citizenship, and therefore define a “clean and proper” English social body through the logic of abjection; or whether to include these “internal Others”<sup>(1)</sup> as subordinate members of a composite British nation/Empire that was moving toward a sense of its own cosmopolitanism.

<2> The citizen’s identity was not the only question facing the Victorians; the nature of citizens’ participation in democratic governance was also under scrutiny. Dellamora describes what was sought as “the classical (and Victorian) dream that a just society would be one governed by friends” (1). But as any PFLAG<sup>(2)</sup> parent knows, there are friends, and there are “friends.” The Victorians perceived this ambiguity: on one hand they attempted to draw (straight) lines around proper male homosocial bonding, usually by demonizing effeminacy and sodomy; on the other, they dipped into the tempting waters of sympathetic, passionate, at times, eroticized same-sex friendship. Friendship was idealized but possibly transgressive, making it “both necessary and potentially dangerous to the existing order” (3). All of these concerns about what Victorian democracy should look like were reflected in and examined by the period’s popular genre, the realist novel, and they left their mark on what might seem, at first glance, its ideologically unblemished face. As Dellamora writes, “the Victorian realist novel was closely associated with attempts to conciliate religious, economic, regional, and national differences within the United Kingdom. The form, however, also offered a means of registering dissent from general maxims about the rights supposedly enjoyed by the inhabitants of the British Isles” (5).

<3> Indeed, one of this book’s many virtues lies in its attention to the ideological implications and effects of genre. Given that Dellamora examines how narratives encode and comment on historical tensions, it is fitting (and ingenious) that the diverse subjects of his study are themselves bound together with a story: the tale of Sodom. Through reference to this narrative, the various conceptual threads of *Friendship's Bonds* intertwine to prove Dellamora’s most striking claim: “Western concepts of the nation-state have been constituted in part in relation to the story of Sodom in Genesis. In other words, Judeo-Christian concepts of the state depend upon the imaginary projection of a condemned opposite, called Sodom in the Bible. Imaginary constructions of the national subject depend upon a shadowy, abjected Other, called the S/sodomite. For this reason, the figuration of sodomy has implications far beyond its immediate implications for men with sexual and emotional ties with other men. Sodomitic rhetoric has been a general feature of Western religio-political discourse” (18). Obviously, one perceives in this claim a debt to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s placing of “modern homo/heterosexual definition”<sup>(3)</sup> front and center in modern Western culture. However, unlike Sedgwick’s account, which at times risks reducing all secrecy and silence to “the closet,” Dellamora’s exploration of Sodomitic allusions interlaces sexual anxieties with other period concerns. The result is a multi-dimensional and richly contextualized study that encompasses Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, Benjamin Disraeli’s *Alroy* and *Tancred*, Karl Marx’s writings on Judaism, W. E. Gladstone’s pamphlet on the “Bulgarian Horrors,” Anthony Trollope’s *The Prime Minister*, George Eliot’s *Daniel*



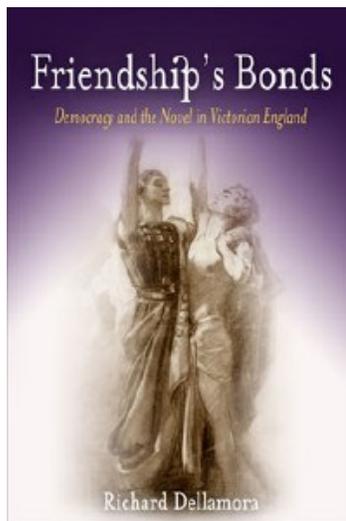
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Back Issues

Issue 2.3



<4> The problem posed by “internal Others” to British national identity tracks consistently throughout the book. In a chapter on Dickens, Dellamora shows how Oliver Twist's “purity” as middle class can only be purchased at the price of stigmatizing (and racializing) a segment of the class he comes from, the working poor—a dehumanization at odds with the novel's critique of class divisions and political inequality. Marx similarly dehumanizes a portion of the citizenry in his polemic against the capitalist status quo. For Marx, Jews epitomize the worst of capitalism: egoism, competitive spirit, obsession with material gain. Gladstone, for all his moral ambivalence about imperialism, was, in Dellamora's judgment, an important player in Victorian racism and anti-Semitism. The Grand Old Man attempted to call “into existence a unified national subject, Protestant, militant, male, who will defend innocent Christian victims against murder and sexual assault by heathen Orientals” (103). In doing so, he stigmatized not only Orientals, but orientalized the converted Jew, Disraeli. Trollope similarly blames Jewish corruption for the decadence and breakdown of gentlemanly values at mid-century, but also criticizes the Tory elite for its insularity and backwardness in refusing anything “not English” (125). Eliot's views on Judaism are somewhat complex, and Dellamora springboards from analysis of them into a surprising and satisfying account of Daniel Deronda as decadent and suffused with Sapphic desire.

<5> Dellamora's earlier book, *Masculine Desire*, deftly exposed the homoeroticism informing various nineteenth-century strands of aestheticist discourse. *Friendship's Bonds* builds on this work, showing how invocations of Sodom not only drew on anti-Semitism in attempting to delineate British nationality, but also conjured images of sexual transgression or even anarchy. Readings of Victorian sexual imagery and subtext can, at times, seem forced and anachronistic, but Dellamora never falls into this trap. In fact, at several points he explicitly states that Sodomitic images, which to our twenty-first-century sensibilities would seem simply to connote homosexuality, in context speak to other anxieties—about religion, politics, aesthetics, male mentorship, or male desire for women, for example. Dellamora's analyses of sexual imagery and subtext are invariably enriched by attention to period contexts. For example, he reads Cruikshank's illustration of Oliver Twist famously asking for “More” as encoding male-male fellatio: Oliver's oversized spoon points upward from the boy's crotch toward Mr. Bumble's mouth. Fair enough. However, Dellamora skillfully links this sexual image to other concerns presented in the novel—anxiety about physical and sexual abuse of children, the demands of an emergent working class for “More,” and ultimately, Dickens's ambiguous portrayal of Oliver's “purity.” The chapter on *Daniel Deronda* contains a subtle and fascinating discussion of eroticized female friendships encoded through Eliot's references to opera contextualized in relation to Eliot's admiration of female cross-dressing operatic roles, her close friendship with self-styled invert Edith Simcox, and her ambivalence about the sexual politics of aestheticism. Dellamora's textual analysis of the oblique homoerotics of James's *The Tragic Muse* is placed within the inescapable context of late-century homophobia, but also read in relation to James's association with “The Souls”—an elite group of aesthetes including John Singer Sargent and Wilde.

<6> In my view, the most developed illustration of the book's thesis occurs in the two chapters on Disraeli. In them, the book's three conceptual strands—race, sexuality, and democracy—are most tightly braided. Detailed narratological analyses of *Alroy* and *Tancred*'s representations of Jewishness, gender, and sexuality are intertwined with discussion of British politics and a fascinating account of the influence of William Beckford, and his novel *Vathek*, on Disraeli. Disraeli has long been thought a somewhat protean figure; he is considered variously as an unprincipled opportunist, an imperial jingoist, or the founder of Tory democracy. Dellamora assesses Disraeli as overdetermined by ideology: defender of Jewish exclusivity, (almost) a forerunner to multiculturalism, critic of crass egoism and competition (yet recognizing their importance to democracy.) Dellamora also brings to light a new text, “The Wondrous Tale of Ikey Solomon,” which he discovered in the New York Public Library. The draft of a satire on Disraeli's *Alroy*, this text “conflates anti-Jewish stereotypes with popular attacks on members of the lower classes” (68).

<7> Dellamora's prose style is clear and detailed in exposition, and he also delights with the occasional graphic image. For example, he narrates the sad fate of Ferdinand Lopez from Trollope's *The Prime Minister*: “Lopez is described as walking backward down a platform into the path of an onrushing train. He is literally taken in the rear in a phantasmatic projection of the deindividualizing effects of sodomitic assault” (123).

<8> *Friendship's Bonds* will be of interest to anyone working in Victorian gender studies. It is a significant contribution to the field that fleshes out understanding of complex issues in canonical and non-canonical texts; it is theoretically grounded, historically contextualized, and textually focused; in short, it shows us what solid and engaging scholarship looks like.

#### Endnotes

(1) The phrase is Jonathan Boyarin's, from his book *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).<sup>(△)</sup>

(2) Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, an activist, social, and support organization.<sup>(△)</sup>

(3) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.<sup>(△)</sup>