



# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Tolerating the Dismal Science

*The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel.*  
Catherine Gallagher. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. 209 pp.

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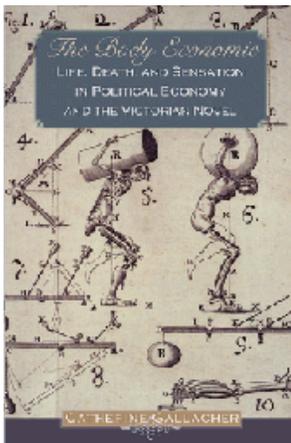
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<1> Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic* is an important contribution to "the new economic criticism," as designated by Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, editors of a collection of essays under this title. And Gallagher's book is an important contribution to Victorian literary and cultural studies, where the capitalist, Benthamite political economy of the era comes into consideration mainly as an object of antipathy and critique for Victorian authors and Victorianist literary critics as well. Gallagher holds that some authors like Thomas Carlyle did adamantly and consistently reject Benthamite political economy, but that other supposed critics, like Charles Dickens, showed signs of "unwitting" adherence, or, like George Eliot, of conscious or unconscious influence (156, 66, 181). Further, Gallagher holds that "literary critics are now more curious and tolerant about economic logic than they were at any time in the twentieth century" (192).

<2> Her study compares in importance to Philip Connell's examination of economic crosscurrents within Romanticism in his *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of Culture* and Regenia Gagnier's account of mainly late 19th C. and 20th C. economics, literature, and culture in her *Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society*. Like Connell, Gallagher focuses on the "classical school" economist Thomas Malthus but she also extends her commentary to address post-Malthusian and later "neoclassical" thinkers as well as nineteenth-century writers on evolutionary life sciences and anthropology including Charles Darwin, Alexander Bain, John McLennan, and others leading to James Frazer's *fin-de-siecle* *The Golden Bough*, and literary Modernism. Her main fictional readings concern works by Dickens and Eliot. Like Gagnier, Gallagher attends to aesthetics. For her, this means reading for economic themes that "allegorize" (131, 136) authors' own concerns as writers for the literary market.

<3> In relation to other critics who write about economics and literature in the Victorian period, I would identify several ways in which Gallagher stands out. By comparison to Claudia Klaver, or, by some margin, Patrick Brantlinger, she expresses a more accepting attitude towards authors' "unwitting" participation in economic thinking. She carries critical "tolerance" toward "economic logic" further than these commentators, or, to add another, Gail Turley Houston. She also shifts away from a tendency to focus on abstract financial representations—the money form and credit, accounting, and banking vehicles—as seen, for instance, in work by Brantlinger, Houston, Mary Poovey, and, at times, Gordon Bigelow. Instead she emphasizes bodily concerns, thus "the body economic" of her title. This delving into physiological fundamentals lends palpability, a sense of seriousness about matters of wealth that are matters of life, death, and sensation. Increasing awareness of what is at stake in this way adds interest and perhaps promotes "tolerance." Still "tolerance" is the word, as far as that goes. There remains a dark tinge to Gallagher's assessment. She is still giving an account of a "dismal science" that "by the opening of the twentieth century . . . had spawned an equally dismal culture" (184).

<4> Gallagher considers the "body economic" in two interrelated aspects. One she calls "bioeconomics," the other "somaeconomics." Malthus is very overtly concerned with human biology, human life and death—with eating, with sex, with reproduction, with population that threatens to outrun the food supply. He is also concerned with sensation, with pleasure and pain, as are other economic thinkers, most notably the Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham. Pleasure and pain are crucially involved in eating and hunger, in sexual gratification and deprivation, in birth and dying, in supporting and failing to support a family. Gallagher shines a strong light on Malthus's insistence on sexual desire, its ineradicability, and its profound importance to human happiness despite the profound problems it poses (10). This makes Malthus's vision tragic; more precisely,

he casts it as a theodicy. For him, grappling with problems is humanity's divinely providential way forward—or for others after Malthus, it is an evolutionary way forward—towards better things.

<5> Gallagher does not spend very much time on practical, real-world, bodily-oriented Malthusian schemes for such grappling and for such advancement towards good outcomes. The reform thrust of political economy is not prominent in her account. She names "moral restraint," which would mainly mean delay of marriage in Malthus's time and, later in the century, would mean other methods of birth control. For the most part, other measures fall out of view—for instance, institution of the New Poor Laws, Corn Laws Repeal, emigration schemes (a factor in empire)—even though these are significant, practical socio-economic reform policies which related to the Malthusian population problem, whatever success or lack of success one might think they had.

<6> Gallagher *is*, however, detailed in her discussion of one reform proposal, which certainly has to do with the body and is most interesting. She sets themes of refuse or detritus in *Our Mutual Friend* in the context of the Benthamite, economist-sanitarian Edwin Chadwick's plan for recycling urban waste as agricultural manure, as fertilizer, which would help clean and make the city healthier while it helped feed the city's expanding population. Gallagher gives evidence of Dickens's interest in Chadwick's idea. That is not to say, and Gallagher doesn't say, that the novel itself pursues the theme to connect London Dust Mounds and river-scavenging to farming improvements in the country. The chapter sticks more closely to a matter of economic theory, not one of reform as such. This too is interesting. Gallagher explores the novel's rendering of the condition of "suspended animation," which is both bodily and economic. She observes what readers commonly observe—that Dickens presents human vitality as capable of objectification in inanimate or semi-animate forms. She goes on to identify such forms as ones that suspend, store, and can ultimately feed new vitality. For instance, Dickens displays a human deanimation-suspension-reanimation process when he describes a skeleton that is an item of sale, a commodity, in Mr. Venus's taxidermy shop, through the selling of which he can earn a living. In another example, Dickens describes dead bodies in the river that are valuable "finds" and can be turned to profit through theft or sale of their effects and made to yield "meat and drink." And he describes bodies—of John Harmon, Rogue Riderhood, and Eugene Wrayburn—that only apparently die by drowning in the river but, after a temporal suspension, rise again to new life. From here, Gallagher points to an equivalence with political economists' conception of commodities (or, at a next level of abstraction, money) as repositories of the human vitality that went into their production and that can in turn be consumed in support of new life. This logic derives from the classical-school labor theory of value. Work is painful and drains life into consumables that hold life-giving potential. I would say that, in theoretical terms, capital presents the maximal form of such suspended animation, so that Marx is only more graphic than other economists in calling capital "dead labor" (Marx 143, and see Blake 219-21). Capital is not Gallagher's prime concern, but her reading of *Our Mutual Friend* is striking and thought-provoking. It culminates by attributing deanimation and suspension to authorship as well, presumably in service of animating the buying and reading public. Gallagher offers a clever turn on Dickens's postscript to the novel. Here the author refers to his near-death experience in a railway accident to show his risk and his heroism as he saves his work to pass it along to his readers. According to Gallagher, when Dickens writes "THE END" on his last page, he indeed "dies" into his fictional commodity in the "suspended" form of its part issues.

<7> As regards *Hard Times*, Gallagher's concern is again the labor theory of value, which she sees Dickens supporting in certain ways. One surprising twist is her claim that Dickens presents even his circus folks as joyless hard workers, another that Dickens's novel itself is laborious or grinding and not very entertaining for a reader as it communicates the author's grim working of his materials. Turning attention to Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*, Gallagher's concern is neoclassical theorizations of declining consumer demand in proportion to prior satisfactions of that demand, which she sees entering into the novel's study of satiation. Certainly it is a new angle to portray Eliot's exploration of her characters' satiety, their entropy and anomie, as a way of confronting what she faces in an Eliot-sated readership, so as to come up with some appetite-reviving novelistic innovations. As regards *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Gallagher's concern is with Malthusian/post-Malthusian ideas on the fraught nature of sexuality and reproduction, which she thinks bear on Eliot's fictional portrayal of, above all, female suffering and sacrifice in love and motherhood. And she thinks these ideas bear on notions of suffering and sacrifice as sources of spiritual and cultural development that enter into Eliot's own artistic credo. The issue of gender is prominent here.

<8> Throughout the book there is mounting insistence on pain, on deanimation and suspension, on hard labor, on decay and pathology of desire and diminishing returns of pleasure, on sexuality and birth shadowed by hunger and death, on suffering, on sacrifice, on grimly laborious and dying and less and less appreciated and agonizing authors. Gallagher invokes Darwin and the struggle for existence, more briefly Freud and sublimation; she invokes Frazer and sacrificial fertility gods. Elements of hedonism or "eudemonism" fade from view—that is, "utility," meaning pleasure, in Bentham's definition, and "use-value," meaning satisfaction of desire, in political economic theory. So do practical reforms of an ameliorist and "improving" nature. Utilitarian economic cost-benefit analysis offers hopes of net gain, of maximization on the benefit side. But the weight is on the cost side in Gallagher's account. A great many aspects of her analysis are surprising, are compelling. She wants to breach the literature/economics divide that has given English studies a sense of "disdain" and "moral superiority" (190-91) in contemplating an antithetical discipline. She cites current economists who care about human bodies and human sensations. Yet her overall picture of a preponderantly dismal "dismal science" will probably confirm the gloomy expectations of many Victorianist literary and cultural critics, or of critics more generally when they think of economics.

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