



NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Outfitting the Seamstress

Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century. Ed. Beth Harris. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005. 274 pp.

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<1> Beth Harris commences her introduction to this collection with the following quotation from Sally Alexander:

More research might lift the clouds of almost unmitigated destitution which appears to have been the fate of practically all needlewomen in the 1830s and 1840s, indeed throughout the nineteenth century. Is it over-optimistic to imagine that some sewing performed at home...was less exhausting and demoralizing than the general image of the 'distressed needlewoman' evokes? (1)

In *Famine and Fashion*, Harris and her co-contributors offer nuanced and complicated representations of the seamstress, both refuting the stereotype that Alexander laments and underscoring how nineteenth-century social, political and economic conditions were every bit as "distressing" to needlewomen as the above quotation suggests. This collection robustly answers Alexander's call for more research on needlewomen by incorporating essays from scholars in a range of disciplines from business and labor history to literary studies, and art history. The contributors have assembled an impressive corpus of texts to establish the field of inquiry; among those including novels, poetry, letters, credit ledgers, trade school annual reports, government records, and newspapers. Harris's volume is divided into two sections. The first, "Reading Out," features essays focusing on the typology of the seamstress in art and literature of the period while the second, "Writing In," addresses the material conditions of the seamstress in England, as well as parts of the United States and Western Europe.

<2> The first section begins with Arlene Young's essay on Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* (1890) which argues that the novel uses needlework to illustrate how such women's work functions to enable and sustain a socially accepted yet quietly empowered female community. By contrast, Joellen Masters's discussion of Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857) presents the limitations of the seamstress trope as embodied by Amy Dorrit; Masters claims that the eponymous character's "unseen sewing in the plot keeps her always a supporting and never a main character" (54). For Masters, this figuring of the title character points to Dickens's inability to imagine a brand of female agency that does not uphold and affirm patriarchal conventions of gender in the nineteenth century.

<3>Essays by Ian Haywood and Ella Dzelzainis echo Masters's critique of male authors's use of the seamstress trope in the literature of Chartist writers Ernest Jones and Cautley Newby. To effectively present the almost-gothic renderings of the mythologized needlewoman's material environment and impoverished psyche, Haywood's essay is accompanied by illustrations from Newby's *Christmas Shadows* (1853), as well as those from Dickens's *The Chimes* (1844) and G.W.M. Reynold's *The Seamstress* (1850). Overall, the pen-and-ink sketches scattered throughout many of the essays provide a palpable companion to the easily imagined dreary landscape of the needlewoman's life, and vistas, in industrial Britain.

<4>A handful of critics in the second section take a transatlantic turn, to sites such as postbellum North Carolina, mid-century Albany, and Boston at the *fin de siècle*. For example, in chapter nine, Pamela J. Nickless's creative use of records such as credit ledgers significantly recovers the historical figure of the North Carolinian middle-class businesswoman, for whom millinery was bread and butter. The essay that most successfully weaves the book's concern with both historical and aesthetic documents is Jaqueline M. Chambers's exploration of how U.S. women writers integrated their knowledge of needlework techniques with their narrative renderings of female

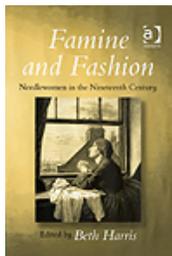
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characters. Chambers's fascinating examination of writers such as Susan Warner, Lydia Sigourney, and Fanny Fern illustrates the skills and understanding of needlework women gained, whether sewing for hire or for the home economy, as a valid source of life and work experience that emerged in texture of their writing.

<5> The collection concludes with an essay by Sheila Blackburn on how the image of the female worker was used by social reformers to publicize the condition of the "sweated industries" during an exhibition in London's West End in 1906. The exhibition, which Blackburn refers to as a "living tableau of wretchedness" (244), exposed the projected social dangers and public health hazards of sweating, and played a significant role in influencing the legislation to protect sweated workers which was finally enacted in 1909. Blackburn traces the chronology of social and cultural responses to sweated needlewomen, from Richard Grainger's 1843 report for the Children's Employment Commission and Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt" (which is discussed at length in Susan P. Casteras's essay in chapter one), to the testimonials of needlewomen to the National Anti-Sweating League in 1907. That Harris concludes with an essay on the role of the needlewoman as an icon of labor movements through the whole of England underscores the wide-ranging concerns that women's needlework could embody as well as the potential for future scholarship.

<6>The essays in *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* create a critical landscape that builds on but also complicates the narrative that Catherine Gallagher, Sally Alexander and others have identified: that of the wide-eyed, provincial, Victorian seamstress who falls prey to the wiles of her predatory employer once she arrives in what Harris calls the "morally polluted atmosphere of the city" (2). In particular, contributors like Susan Ingalls Lewis and Wendy Gamber expand our knowledge of the seamstress with their discussion of needlework in light of the rise of the women's trades in the United States. These essays recover and explicate vital historical evidence of women's work, and provide a useful backdrop for understanding the American middle-class businesswoman; it is likely that future research on needlewomen from both sides of Atlantic will spring from this valuable collection.

