

**The Citizen Has No Body**

*The Citizen's Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England.* Pamela K. Gilbert. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. 194 pp.

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<1> In *The Citizen's Body* Pamela K. Gilbert returns to topics treated in her earlier books, *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (1997) and *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (2004). The shared interest in the body is captured in each of these titles and, it could be argued, is increasingly sharpened: from "the body" to the "Victorian social body" to "the citizen's body." To the extent that health is the flipside of disease, it is not surprising to encounter concerns addressed in *Disease, Desire and the Body* carried over in Gilbert's new book. I mention titles here because it is also through the title that we can see most clearly where the book under review falters; it seems to promise an analysis of the Victorian citizen's body in the context of desire, health, and the social. Certainly one can imagine a fascinating book along these lines. But such a book would require that a strong definition of the citizen's body be carried through the work as a whole, coupled with strong and consistent deployments of desire, health, and the social. On none of these fronts (although perhaps most grievously when it comes to the social) does *The Citizen's Body* deliver. That said, Gilbert's book contains many local insights and also the glimmerings of a compelling argument.

<2> *The Citizen's Body* is wonderfully structured. Divided into three sections it addresses first the conception of the citizen's body as it was articulated through the political (with an emphasis on the First and Second Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867, respectively); second, the body as it was articulated through the social (with an emphasis on Octavia Hill and housing for the poor); and finally, the body as it was mobilized through the novel (ranging from the 1830s through the 1860s). This structure should have allowed Gilbert to approach both the body and the social through a range of perspectives and frameworks. Unfortunately, however, the social only comes fully into focus, not surprisingly, in section two, and more or less drops out of the analysis in section three (there are many uses of the word "social" in this section but it is not, strictly speaking, integral to the analyses of these novels). Desire might have also been threaded through each of these sections with different inflections but, in fact, only comes into focus in section three (and really only in the final chapter of this section). Similarly, the emphasis on health and the body in section one is tenuously developed.

<3> In this book Gilbert turns to competing definitions of citizenship between the two reform bills to argue, in the context of Victorian liberalism, for a new understanding of fitness for citizenship that was articulated and refined through the social rather than political domain. This understanding — approached in differing ways in political debates, housing debates, and the novel — defined the citizen's body as individualized, healthy, and self-contained. Gilbert situates this argument in the context of Mary Poovey's elaboration of the social body in *Making a Social Body* (1995) and in Lauren M. E. Goodlad's (and others') discussions of liberalism. In a broader context, she wants to bring together Foucault and Habermas to articulate a sharper understanding of the social, one that is at once attuned to Habermas' comprehension of the public sphere and Foucault's development of governmentality in his later work. She begins, however, with Arendt and her early distinction between the public, the private, and the social. Arendt drops out, without much warning, early on. I wanted more of a sense of a dialogue with Poovey and Goodlad, a sense that Gilbert was taking ideas introduced in their books and working with them, challenging them, or moving them forward rather than a few citations that were not woven into the argument as a whole. Foucault and Habermas were similarly cited for their contributions to local problems but without a sense of a broader picture and the contributions their thinking might make to any of the topics under scrutiny here (e.g., the reform bills, housing debates, or the novel). More problematically, in the absence of material drawn from sociology, the social (the newly emergent domain mediating between public and private) itself remains somewhat loose and ill defined. As Gilbert notes in passing, in nineteenth-century England "the social" became increasingly professionalized as sociology came into its own as a discipline. The interesting questions about this shift, however, are left unasked.

<4> A great deal of this book is devoted to what Gilbert, following the literature of the period, terms "fitness" for citizenship. She makes many claims for a new understanding of the citizen grounded in the healthy body but offers very little substantive support for such claims. We are told that the first two chapters of the book's first section "provide a detailed analysis of parliamentary debates on the franchise and exposition of competing notions of political fitness. Within these debates we can also trace the impact of sanitary visions of the body" (10). These analyses, however, are anything but detailed. In three chapters of roughly ten pages each, Gilbert explores citizenship in her analysis through quotations from a very small number of debates that almost never mention either citizenship or the body. She does, however, make a good case for the introduction of citizenship and rights into the 1867 debates and the tensions between the individual and mass identities.

<5> I mentioned above that there is a potentially interesting argument within these pages. Gilbert's claim, for example, that fitness for citizenship in the mid-Victorian period is "tied to a particular domestic environment and individualized body" (39) is promising. But in the absence of a fully developed illustration of that "particular domestic environment" the argument attains only embryonic form. Further, the "individualized body" too often is simply conflated with "the individual." I wanted a much better sense, in other words, of how both the domestic and the body work in the argument throughout especially because the domestic — and, following Gilbert, its cultivation of the normalized and privatized (so to speak) body — is so integral to the picture of the social, and its uneasy balancing of public and private matters, that underpins this book.

<6> In large part, these shortcomings stem from Gilbert's methodology. In a footnote she writes: "what is significant is the logic behind [*Hansard's*] arguments and the repeated use of certain tropes and images that clearly reflect a wider discursive formation" (34). I agree with her. But why is this comment in a footnote? And why is it not demonstrated in the analysis itself? While I am inclined to agree, for example, with Gilbert's claim that the "home" is important in reform rhetoric, I found almost no demonstrations of this point anchored in the primary documents themselves; instead Gilbert rehearses secondary material on domesticity that will not be new to most readers. I wanted examples of those repeated "tropes and images" to which she refers in combination with a better understanding of the larger discursive formation they reflected. Gilbert at one point explains that she offers her reader "long excerpts" from the primary documents to illustrate the language used. But where are those long excerpts? (I counted only one.) Finally, there are many unexplained leaps and "therefores" that do not seem to follow from anything that precedes. In short, this book does not provide an adequate framework for emerging definitions of citizenship, along with adequate logic and evidence to support its large — and often very interesting — claims. Indeed, what it needs is precisely the combination of definition, precision, and insight that one finds in Gilbert's earlier books.

<7> *The Citizen's Body* does get better as it goes along. The strongest sections are those devoted to the novel. In different ways, each of the novels discussed in this book puts pressure on developing distinctions upheld in other domains (novels under discussion include *Sybil* [1845], *Miss Marjoribanks* [1866], *North and South* [1855], *Bleak House* [1853], and *Our Mutual Friend* [1865]). The section on *Felix Holt* (1866) and addiction was especially interesting although, ironically, it might have been stronger if it were not folded into the wider argument of the book. In these sections, too, a closer attention to form — repeated tropes and images — would have enhanced the discussion. At the outset Gilbert notes that her book is tracing the "figure of the healthy body" (5), but I was not convinced that any of the examples here illustrated that figure. Most of the examples Gilbert catalogues demonstrate how *all* bodies are vulnerable to the dangers and threats experienced most graphically in depictions of the poor. Further, the healthy body, like Heidegger's "present-to-hand," is not, in general, sharply delineated precisely because it is healthy — that is, it is not "broken." It is the unhealthy body, the diseased body, the body that needs to be corrected, that is given weight in the examples Gilbert offers. When the body is healthy it recedes, arguably to the point of invisibility.

<8> In the end, then, I remained puzzled by the citizen's body itself. Does the citizen, I wondered, even have a body? Early on, Gilbert writes: "The mid-Victorian ideal of citizenship, based, understandably, on the aristocratic tradition, insists on the separation of the *res publicae* from the realms of necessity and the body . . . [following Descartes] the mind must be separated from the body" (33). Those whose bodies are front and center — paupers, the hungry, the inadequately housed — are accordingly disqualified for citizenship. Later Gilbert writes, "The well-fed, well-groomed, modest body . . . upright and manly, a little repulsed by the proximity of others, taking in its food alone, reading its individual newspaper, hungering for larger quarters with more separate rooms, more privacy, is the body of the citizen" (60). Here Gilbert stipulates a body for the emergent citizen, the citizen who has made the transition from a massed class-identity to something resembling an individual. But she seems to sidestep the very point that she raised earlier with respect to liberalism's separation of the mind from the body, the fact that it "brackets embodiment," as Michael Warner puts it.<sup>(1)</sup> Perhaps the most intractable tension in

this book pits the title that announces the “citizen’s body” against the argument that suggests to be a citizen is to be free of necessity, to have so disavowed one’s body, or been raised above one’s body, as to have no body at all.

#### Endnotes

(1)Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005) 45.(^)