

**Situating the Exceptional Woman**

*Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Linda L. Clark. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 300 pp.

*The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature*. Antonia Losano. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. 300 pp.

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<1> In 1854 the British poet Coventry Patmore published *The Angel in the House*, a narrative poem that paid tribute to his “angel wife Emily,” and in the process of doing so reinforced a Victorian ideal of feminine self-sacrifice, submissiveness, and motherly devotion. The poem did not garner a significant deal of attention upon its initial publication, but perhaps fittingly, as Patmore continued to revise the poem – and his ailing wife Emily died, thus passing from material body to metaphorical figure – *The Angel in the House* took hold as a dominant ideal in a Victorian public imagination eager to gloss over the realities of living through the romanticized nostalgia of myth. Patmore did not originate the ideal of feminine passivity in either England or anywhere else in Europe or America; indeed, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1754 discussion on the natural woman had already positioned her as the gentle helpmeet to the emerging republicanism of the natural man. Patmore’s angel extended this template, creating an image that encouraged ideology to crystallize. His angel became a poster child, so to speak, for the *idea* of a particular and rarified sort of womanhood.

<2> The concept of the angel has been picked up, picked over, and rejected by a host of significant feminist thinkers and historians, perhaps most famous of these being Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who in 1891 wrote that the race of the long-suffering and largely ignorant angel was in its waning days, and by Virginia Woolf, who in 1931 sped the extinction of the angel through images of murder. In our own moment, the trope of the Angel in the House has been an effective, if often overused, means of typifying a separate-spheres paradigm that coded domestic spaces and concerns as feminine and public spaces, including the rough and tumble of the marketplace, as masculine. We can understand the separation of the spheres as a metaphor meant to compel prescriptive roles, but this metaphor was sutured together and earned its potency through political, institutional, and social structures (such as women’s limited property entitlements, disenfranchisement, and narrow access to education) that made the living of ideology a complicated, and often restrictive, experience. A public/private division was always leaky, particularly in the case of female bodies not marked by whiteness or middle-class identity.

Prohibitions on entry into the workforce or mobility through public spaces thus had different meanings for working-class women. And yet, the metaphor itself produced a version of idealized femininity that reinforced an ideological barrier to women's labor, professional remuneration, public visibility, and political action.

<3> The point here, then, is that though a separate-spheres typology cannot be relied upon as an apt description of actual practices in the nineteenth century, particularly if that ideology presumes a version of the past that was rigidly and purely divided between public/male and private/female, we equally cannot do away with the compelling significance of the ideology altogether since the discourses of a masculine public sphere and a feminine domestic space wielded considerable social influence on real-world nineteenth-century issues such as labor practices, professionalization, and women's rights. Two new books help to put the tensions between these ideologies and practices into a richer context. Linda L. Clark's *Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe* contributes to this discussion through a well-documented and broadly considered evaluation of significant moments when women were able to break through, and thus alter, social and ideological oppression, while Antonia Losano's *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* offers a more specific and detailed analysis of the figure of the woman painter as represented in fictional accounts by British women writers. When read as companion texts, Clark and Losano's books combine to create a compelling portrait of dynamic and significant work performed by women in the last two hundred years.

<4> *Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe* is a comprehensive historical overview of women's accomplishments, activities, and visibility in Europe and parts of Russia as manifested through a long nineteenth century, beginning at the time of the French Revolution and extending to World War I. Starting squarely in debates about the separation of the spheres, Clark tellingly demonstrates how women were "excluded from new political rights awarded to men," even as they "tested the limits on restrictions long presumed to hold women back" (1, 3). Important to a discussion on women and achievement is just exactly how one defines achievement. Clark both raises and refuses to address the meaning of the term except to say that "the study of 'achievers' is not intended to suggest to readers that they are intrinsically more meritorious than the millions of women whose names are lost from historical record" (3). We can understand from the evidence that Clark submits, however, that achievement requires both rising to a degree of public recognition and defying limits presumed to keep women in their place.

<5> Clark's project is an ambitious one, for in addition to the large historical sweep and the span of nations and political events that she incorporates into her study, Clark also holds herself accountable to discussions on the law, professional authorship, fame, the arts, political reform, education, and social change. She does so by looking at legal, medical, and aesthetic materials produced across a broad swathe of European nations. As just one example, her discussion on women's rights organizations includes Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, and Switzerland. The reader familiar with women's activism, scholarship, and artistry in the nineteenth century will encounter a number of familiar names, including George Eliot, George Sand, Josephine Butler, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Germaine de Staël, and Ellen Terry, while also being introduced to perhaps new figures, such as

Norway's "first feminist," Camilla Collett, or France's late eighteenth-century impresario of midwifery, Angélique Marguerite Le Boursier du Coudray, who trained upwards of 10,000 women in the ways of child delivery.

<6> Given that Clark covers all of this spatial and historical ground in less than 300 pages, she must sacrifice specificity for breadth. Any reader approaching *Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe* must therefore engage with the work knowing that it will help to lay out a broad topographical surface, even if the complexity of the terrain must be mapped by other scholars. Indeed, I sometimes found myself frustrated with the encyclopedic sweep of this book, if only because my own literary and historical training privileges close textual analysis within more specific boundaries. As a reader I wanted greater detail about the women included in Clark's compendium of achievement, including a more nuanced discussion of how authors, like Margaret Oliphant or Elizabeth Gaskell, defied the value of their professional skills through the very skills and visibility that professionalism offered. To Clark's credit, she does pause in the recitation of examples for extended considerations (i.e., a page instead of a paragraph) of particular women. Due to Clark's academic specialization in France and women's history, the women given extended narrative consideration tend to be French – such as Germaine de Staël or George Sand – which may have unwittingly contributed to a notion that French women stood apart from their female colleagues of other nations in terms of achievement.

<7> These concerns about brevity of detail, however, do not diminish the usefulness or value of the book. Clark's commitment to breadth helps diminish the balkanization that is often a consequence of academic work, where scholars stay firmly planted within the boundaries of nation and period. As such, I consider Clark's book a helpful reminder of the fluidity and pervasiveness of both ideologies and social movements, which in themselves freely cross over and between historical epics and national borders. *Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe* offers a helpful resource, rich in legal, cultural, and familial detail. Her examples collectively supply information on specific incidents in which women with aspiration were able to do meaningful work. If we are sometimes missing the "how" of women's achievement in this book, we do come away with an increased appreciation for the saturation and extent of women's activities.

<8> Antonia Losano's *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* similarly engages with issues of women's achievement, again underscoring the fluidity and leakiness between the domains of the public and private. Losano, in contrast to Clark, limits herself to a study of written representations of female painters in works by such British authors as Anne and Charlotte Brontë, Anna Mary Howitt, Margaret Oliphant, George Eliot, Mary Ward, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Dinah Craik, and Charlotte Yonge. Losano's aim in this regard is quite clear. In her own words, "I set out here to examine how the complex involvement of women in the nineteenth-century art world impacted the work of women writers of the same period, roughly 1848-1900" (3). Lest we consider this too unambitious an exercise, Losano is painstaking in walking the reader through a series of complicated and relevant intellectual arguments that stand at the crux of her examination. Thus, Losano's introduction offers orientation in materialist aesthetics, interart criticism (the study of the inter-relationship between word and image), gender

theory, and the cult of the genius, as discussed and elaborated on in both a nineteenth-century context and a twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarly discourse.

<9> Crucial to Losano's discussion is the concept of ekphrasis – or the verbal rendering of visuality – which, she argues, has long been understood as a distinctly gendered phenomenon. “Critics have uniformly coded the word as male in ekphrastic encounters,” she notes, “while the silent and beautiful image that cannot speak for itself is, unsurprisingly, feminized” (9). Representations of female painters in fictional texts constructed by women writers offer several challenges to aesthetic and artistic paradigms since they position the active, seeing, and discerning artist as a woman of talent and sometimes also of genius. It is important to note in this regard that Losano examines fictional representations where women writers construct and comment on women painters, what she calls “notional ekphrasis,” rather than actual accounts of women's written evaluations of women painters because she could find “no nineteenth-century works by women which ekphrastically describe real artworks by other women” (12). Fiction thus provides not only the best, but in Losano's estimation, the only point of access for this kind of study. Although I would have preferred that Losano make a claim for the unique value of fiction as a device for information and interpretation rather than a second option in the absence of “real” historical documentation, I still appreciate the way she positions creative products as central to the issue of identity and representation.

<10> Each chapter of *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* offers a detailed reading of the consequences of representing artistic labor through words. When the woman painter is imagined by men, Losano writes in her first chapter on public discourse about women painters, she is often depicted in ways that reinforce her femininity through the accentuation of her body and the consequent diminishment of her legitimate skills. Losano is particularly adept at pointing out ways in which a “persistent eroticization” puts the female painter into a sexualized body so as to attempt to “eradicate female visual creativity by reinstating romance and erotic desire as central to a woman's experience” (52). In a detailed reading of a satirical *Punch* article about the first exhibit staged by the Society of Female Artists in 1857, Losano suggests that “Victorian periodical treatments of women painters” deployed an aesthetic judgment that often allowed a male spectator to “reinscribe the working woman as a ‘private object of desire’ rather than a ‘public agent’” (44). This dismantling of artistic legitimacy through the reinscription of a heterosexual norm, Losano argues, encouraged a larger Victorian culture to look through (rather than look at) the artwork to the artist, thus diminishing the perceived value of the painting as artifact. I believe this is an astute reading of how “ambitious” women were corralled and ideologically policed, although I am also troubled by the gender politics that are assumed to be part and parcel of the relationship between the woman writer and the woman painter. In suggesting an equal and non-erotic parity between “sister artists,” Losano unwittingly reifies a heteronormative logic of the gaze when she argues that the sexualized figure of the female painter was always a repressive one. There is no reason to believe, for instance, that the eroticized figure of the woman painter could be attractive only to a heterosexual male spectator, that the sisterhood of artistry precluded an erotics between women, or that a male writer could not have invested the female painter with the sort of agency that Losano ascribes to the women-authored novels she investigates. Representation serves many ends, and it could well be that the woman writer found the woman painter an object of fascination largely because the female subject authorized one woman to gaze intently at another.

<11> That being said, I believe that Losano's overall analysis is both intelligent and convincing. Whether she is describing desire and a feminist aesthetics in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) or the feminist recovery project of "great women artists" as performed by Victorian women (in this case, Ritchie of Angelica Kauffman), Losano's writing and analysis are steadfast, rigorous, and provocative. Losano argues that the figure of the woman as painter, when depicted by her "sister artist" the writer, could produce a set of circumstances that gave female characters an agency in both artistry and interpretation. She was, as Losano describes Anne Brontë's Helen Graham, "a creative producer in her own right, rather than an aesthetic object" (74). Moving between textual analysis, historical discussion, and image interpretation, Losano adeptly demonstrates that the meanings of the woman painter as character were intricately tied into prevailing discussions about gender and the cultural power of aesthetics.

<12> I found the material examined in each of the chapters riveting, but I was particularly engaged with Losano's discussion on women, beauty, and disfigurement in chapter 6, in which she takes up work by the noncanonical authors Craik and Yonge. As I have mentioned, Losano contends that male-generated critiques of the woman painter tended to re-center her body as the object of the critical gaze, thus shifting the gaze from the artwork to the artist. Throughout the book, Losano argues that female representations of women painters repositioned the erotic politics of the gaze by giving the painter-protagonist agency as a cultural producer and shaper of meaning. In chapter 6, Losano looks at two texts, Craik's *Olive* (1850) and Yonge's *Pillars of the House* (1873), in which the painter-protagonists' bodies are deformed by a hunchback and crippled foot respectively, and so, Losano argues, refute the logic of eroticization that adheres to other representations of the woman painter. Craik's and Yonge's painters are trebly disfigured, Losano contends, "[f]irst as women, always already deformed; next as deformed physical bodies; then as artists in a culture that feared women's imaginative capabilities" (183). Rather than using this triple dislocation as a means to disempower their heroines, Craik and Yonge put their characters' "multiple disfigurements" to powerful discursive ends by allowing them to "escape normative gender roles and succeed in the world of art" (185). In these sorts of examples, Losano demonstrates how women writers were able to marshal the imaginative and discursive power of the woman painter to expand the status that might adhere to all female artistic producers.

<13> I was particularly pleased that Losano chose to end the book with a chapter on the always-tricky-for-feminists Mary Ward (better known in her own day as Mrs. Humphry Ward), who evinced a "complicated and contradictory relationship to fin-de-siecle feminism" (218). Losano suggests that Ward had a fascination with the representation of female characters as artists, and used these characters to work through issues related to aesthetics, consumerism, and gender. Ward's *The Mating of Lydia* (1913) is a particularly interesting rendering of the painter-protagonist, since Ward creates two female painter characters who fail in both the artistic and business aspects of painting. Losano ultimately avers that Ward was more interested in arguing for a return to a mid-Victorian aesthetic belief that held art must have "moral, social, and political use" than in legislating for women's equal treatment, but I believe she could have productively turned Ward's resistance to augment the argumentative arc of the book (231). If we know nothing else about patriarchy, we know that individual women are often as complicit in its function and perpetuation as are men, so that the structures of oppression that perpetuate bias are mutually created across sex and gender lines. In this regard, women who take exception are as critical to the argument of feminist social change and practice as are exceptional women.

<14> Both Clark and Losano offer compelling books that help situate what Clark terms the “shrill insistence that women remain in the private space of the home” (58). Our charge as readers thus becomes that we not fully dismiss a separate-spheres paradigm as outmoded and historically inaccurate, but that we continue to search out its ideological complexity and residual coercive powers.