

The Girl of the Period and the Gender of the Periodical

Gender and the Victorian Periodical. Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 255 pp.

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<1> Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston's book, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*, presents an intriguing glimpse into the world of nineteenth-century periodicals, arguing that the malleability of gender identities in the Victorian period are given wide expression in the periodicals of the day. These authors suggest that the public and private spheres, far from being "separate," were actually linked by mediating spaces, like the periodical, where the gender roles proscribed by the ideology of separate spheres were reinforced and often challenged. In presenting their work, Fraser, Green, and Johnston look at the entire chain of the periodical press, from writer to editor to reader, to see where and how gender plays a role and to interrogate the ways in which the periodical disseminated social ideologies to the English-speaking world.

<2> In their introduction, the authors suggest that their study is both a historically based empirical work and one that focuses on close rhetorical analysis (16). In fact, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* attempts, with much success, to walk a fine line between breadth, consulting more than 120 periodicals published primarily in London or Edinburgh, and depth, conducting analytical close readings on articles and passages to support their claims. This mixture of close readings and broad overviews is a refreshing approach to periodicals and one that lends authority to their work through its ability to both provide the reader with "big picture" views of a topic as well as snippets of specific works. The chapters all follow this model of breadth mixed with depth, and are generally organized both chronologically and thematically.

<3> The first two chapters set the stage for the rest of the book, providing a general background on the writer as a gendered subject and the reader as a gendered object. Chapter 1 explores masculinity as a dominant voice in publishing and the increasing number of female writers in the nineteenth century. Fraser, Green, and Johnston argue that the practice of publishing anonymously gave women and men opportunities to cross gender boundaries while signed works enabled women to create a sense of their own authoritative, and public, voices. Chapter 2 continues to look at the construction of gender roles, but the focus shifts to the readers of the periodicals. This chapter addresses how periodicals created a wider social conversation as well as

looking at how the journals crafted a gendered identity for the audience. The most interesting section of these early chapters comes in the discussion of “audience participation” to define the ways in which the readers became a part of the production of the journal through contributions and letters to the editor. This discussion, which suggests that readers resisted easy categorization and read across putative gender boundaries, contributes a sense of the Victorian reader as invested in the periodical press and an active participant in the construction of the journalistic form. Building on these first two chapters, chapter 3 discusses the relationship between the editorial stance and gender. This chapter includes a look at the writing-in or -out of female authors in editorial policies and how house styles shaped the general direction and consumption of the journal. While much of the content in the first three chapters will feel familiar to some readers, they present an engaging discussion of these materials and provide a useful background for those readers less familiar with periodical studies.

<4> Switching gears, Fraser, Green, and Johnston frame chapters 4 through 7 around social themes. Chapter 4 looks at “gender and the politics of home,” arguing that “home” refers not only to the domestic household, but also to the nation. This parallel analysis of the private home and the sphere of nationhood, while not entirely new, is quite cleverly conceived and emphasizes the positioning of women as the moral centers of the private spheres and protectors of the ideology of the nation. Chapter 5 takes the question of nationalism and home one step further, arguing that periodicals were a tool for creating both “Englishness” at home and spreading it abroad through imperialism. In order to limit their exploration, Fraser, Green, and Johnston focus primarily on writing about Australia. While this limitation is interesting, chapter 5 is one of the points in the book where it is clear that more work could easily be done, using this analysis as a jumping-off point. Chapter 6 turns from the greater world back to a more focused discourse on feminism and women’s publishing opportunities. The authors do a good job of concentrating on the works of early feminists and the treatment of feminism in the press without becoming myopic, discussing not just the “woman question,” but also overlapping issues of religious and national concern that complicated the evolving discourse. The final chapter addresses issues of commodity culture. This chapter looks at both *fin-de-siècle* journals aimed at the aesthetes and how women and men were recreated as commodities within the realm of the periodical press. This chapter provides a provocative analysis of Victorian commodity culture that is suggestive for further studies in the realm of material culture.

<5> One of the things that the authors do well is using not only their primary source texts, but also secondary source scholarship and images from the primary sources. It is clear that Fraser, Green, and Johnston are well read within their field and they regularly draw on that knowledge to supplement and support their own work. They also make impressive use of their illustrations. Many scholars seem to use illustrations as a means of breaking up a block of text without really doing any analysis of what the pictures present to contemporary and modern readers. While they only sparingly use illustrations (eight plates are included in the text), the authors explore their images through close reading and deftly indicate their relevance to the topic at hand. This careful attention to close reading of texts and images is part of what makes *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* such a valuable addition to the Victorianist’s bookshelf.

<6> At the beginning of their conclusion, the authors reference Elaine Showalter's book *Sexual Anarchy* (1990) and its exploration of the transgressing of boundaries at the end of the century. The authors use Showalter's work to express the types of boundary-crossing that they argue is evident throughout the nineteenth century, although the boundaries break down most completely in the last few decades. While gender codes and restrictions were slow to change, Fraser, Green, and Johnston suggest in their conclusion that it is the subtle push of periodicals and their ability to form and reform gender identities that helped to shape this transformation.

<7> The authors' arguments are certainly compelling and, overall, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* does an excellent job of presenting its sources and building strong arguments around their analysis of those sources. However, for a book that purports, in its title, to be a discussion of *gender*, there is far more material on femininity than masculinity. In addition, the broad scope of the text sometimes means that major topics, topics large enough to perhaps warrant a book of their own, do not get the detail or attention that an interested reader might desire. Despite these limitations, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* is a valuable resource and its appendix of periodicals consulted provides a very useful snapshot of a wide variety of nineteenth-century sources. Ultimately, Fraser, Green, and Johnston have crafted a solid argument with a creative methodology that would be helpful for anyone interested in Victorian periodicals and gender or women's studies.