

Women in the Workplace in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport, *Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2013), 238 pp., \$69.95 cloth.

Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski, *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 306 pp., \$124.95 cloth.

“*E*very undertaker should employ women,” wrote Priscilla Bell Wakefield in *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798), “for the express purpose of supplying the female dead, with those things which are requisite. How shocking is the idea of our persons being exposed, even after death, to the observation of a parcel of undertaker’s men” (47). Wakefield finds employment opportunities in the loopholes and inconsistencies of the gender ideology of the long nineteenth century. In doing so, she demonstrates the mental acrobatics many women performed in order to negotiate places (actual and hypothetical) for themselves within the economic landscape of the period. Two recently published essay collections on women’s economic positions and professional status in nineteenth-century Great Britain provide a rich view of the whole circus.

Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport introduce *Economic Women* by invoking Marx’s “Homo Economicus,” the economic man epitomized in fiction by that self-sufficient empire builder, Robinson Crusoe. As

Dalley and Rappoport suggest, no equivalent “economic woman” existed, either in the popular imagination or in the social histories economists at the time produced. Instead of searching for a female Crusoe or lamenting her nonexistence, Dalley and Rappoport bring together a diverse set of essays that reveal the multiple and various ways nineteenth-century women were economic agents. To support the range of economic identities women of the era embodied, Dalley and Rappoport have usefully divided their volume into four parts, each focused on a type of economy in which women participated. Ethical or moral economies is the focus of Part I; Part II deals with the nineteenth-century study of political economy; household economy is the focus of Part III; and Part IV is concerned with women in business and women’s work. This range of approaches is also reflected in the individual essays comprising the volume, which cover the gamut from literary analysis to case study, fictional economic women to their real counterparts. Dalley and Rappoport encourage their readers to “forge their own connections between essays, and engage in the fuller, richer picture our contributors paint of Economic Women in nineteenth-century British culture,” and indeed, surprising and interesting continuities and disruptions emerge within and across the sections of this collection (4).

The three essays that make up the section on “moral economies” exemplify this diversity. Leslee Thorne-Murphy’s examination of the 1845 Anti-Corn Law League bazaar brings League pamphlets and news articles on the bazaar into conversation with Harriet Martineau’s *Dawn Island*, written specifically for sale at the bazaar. Thorne-Murphy highlights the ironic clash of ideologies in the League’s choice to use a bazaar, the epitome of an artificially inflated market, to raise money for their free trade campaign. As Thorne-Murphy notes, this clash was also gendered, pitting women’s overpriced handicraft (the traditional stock of a bazaar) against the cheap manufactured goods sold alongside them. *Dawn Island*, Thorne-Murphy ultimately contends, “wove a subtle argument responding to the gendered rhetoric of the bazaar by insisting on the value of women’s work to the healthy functioning of free trade”

(45). Bookending Thorne-Murphy's study is Ilana M. Blumberg's analysis of *Romola* and Kathryn Gleadle's case study of one family's engagement with the legal and social responses to the food shortages of 1794-95 and 1800-1801, two essays which seem far apart in focus and approach, but which come together in describing how civic engagement for women (fictional and real) was shaped by complex social, moral, and economic pressures. One of the interesting continuities between the two essays centers on the place of sacrifice in the market economy. Within the space of fiction, Blumberg asserts, George Eliot "dramatizes ethical exchange as the willingness to sacrifice one's own capital so that it anonymously supports transgenerational and extrafamilial beneficiaries; such exchange expresses the conviction that the future of humanity supersedes any one individual's claims" (69). For Blumberg, sacrifice becomes a way to transcend self; *Romola*'s actions connect moral and market economies. A different view of sacrifice emerges from Gleadle's study, which highlights an insuperable division between these economies. Gleadle describes the sacrifice Katherine's teenage niece, Jane, feels she needs to make in order to participate in a form of "dietary economy." Dietary economy, one of the gentry's responses to the scarcity of grain during the food shortages, meant variously, "in many places [...] the inhabitants agreed to use only brown bread" or "forbore the use of bread at every meal but breakfast" (Plymley, qtd. in Gleadle 33). For Jane, this meant near starvation and the subsequent "physical side effects now associated with anorexia nervosa" which Gleadle suggests precipitated her death six years later (36). For Gleadle, Jane's extreme response was her way of identifying with the working class with whom she sympathized, and participating in the political and economic crises of the food riots while remaining true to a standard of femininity which required her to be passive and constricted to the home. In her self-imposed starvation, Jane, Gleadle concludes, "articulated a need to suppress her wider public ambitions" (37).

Other essays in *Economic Women* offer new insights on figures widely studied in histories of women and economics. In Part II, Mary

Poovey's examination of Florence Nightingale's statistical work on military mortality rates suggests that Nightingale should be recognized not just for her contributions to the field of nursing and to the more general professionalization of women, but as an innovator in the mathematical study of political economy. Poovey argues that Nightingale's *Mortality of the British Army* (1858), *Notes on Matters Affecting the Health of the British Army* (1858), and *A Contribution to the Sanitary History of the British Army* (1859) display her "embryonic recognition that what statistical representation could do was to simultaneously capture the conditions individuals suffered and compare these conditions with others that readers might know firsthand," a precursor to and influence on the type of applied statistics favored by modern economists (83). The other two essays in this section provide fresh readings of novels that are often discussed in terms of their engagement with economic issues. Gordon Bigelow's "The Cost of Everything in *Middlemarch*" argues that Eliot evinced skepticism toward a movement in political economics that sought to align it more closely with the methodologies of the natural sciences. Nor was Eliot's opinion wholly aligned with the political economy of Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill, as she "[modified] their view through her attention to the social meaning of valuable things" (99). Deanna K. Kreisel's "Demand and Desire in *Dracula*" examines the novel in the context of late-century anxieties regarding the demand theory of value. She compares representations of supply and demand in the novel to economic issues given prominence in John Ruskin's "The Ethics of Dust" which suggested "insufficient consumption, particularly in the form of hoarding or overinvestment in capital goods, posed a threat to the continued growth of the British economy" (111). Since women were so often figured as household managers, overspending or hoarding in turn, this national threat seemed equally a threat posed by women. Thus Kreisel's essay shifts critical focus away from the Count's habits of consumption to concentrate on Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, the first as a figure of

insatiable and irresponsible demand, the second as a figure of insufficient consumption.

Part III begins with Janette Rutterford's case study of Emily Nugent, Marchioness of Westmeath. In her essay, Rutterford paints a disturbing picture of the evils of coverture prior to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, particularly when a woman's husband violates the terms of her marriage contract and her family does nothing to bring him to account. As Rutterford demonstrates, Lady Westmeath was impoverished by her marriage and had no control over the loss of her fortune, yet she was also able to work within her legally disadvantageous position to tap into a number of sources of income: court appointments, government pensions, and a bullish investment plan among them. Erika Rappaport's contribution to this section examines a series of readers' letters published in the *Daily Telegraph* on the costs of marriage. As a whole, the letters express anxiety about the growth of consumer culture and the spending habits of both sexes. Emigration, discussed in the letters in the context of these concerns, emerges not as a solution to the need for more capital; instead, Rappaport argues, readers saw it as "a way to opt out of England's increasingly consumer-oriented society" (145), conceiving "empire as a domestic space that hearkened back to an imagined rural and precapitalist past free from the social and material pressures of the modern age" (146). Part III concludes with Esther Godfrey's analysis of *The Woman in White*, which shifts focus from women's struggles with economic inequities to the threat wealthy women posed to masculinity. She argues that "gender identities are both fluid and economically driven" (163): in the novel, both Sir Percival Glyde and Walter Hartright are emasculated by poverty, particularly in the face of Laura Fairlee's wealth. It is only through Hartright's suppression of Laura's art (her attempt to contribute to their altered family fortunes) that he is able to reassert his masculine superiority, an action, Godfrey suggests, which mirrors Collins' own anxiety about female competition in the writing market.

Economic Women concludes with three essays that look at women in “business.” Tara MacDonald’s study of gossip in Ellen Wood’s *St. Martin’s Eve* suggests that the “gossip economy” served both as a way for women within the novel to exchange valuable information that helped them circumvent their economic subjugation and attain security, and, since sensation fiction was “frequently linked to gossip,” as a way for Wood herself to capitalize on the reading public’s appetite for such material (182). The business that Nancy Henry discusses in her essay on Charlotte Riddell is, surprisingly, the business of “the City,” an unlikely subject for this collection because of its status as a male-dominated space and because, as Henry argues, “a legacy of hostility to pro-capitalist writing – traceable to Victorian literary reviews” has led to the general scholarly neglect of Riddell’s financial novels (195). Henry provides very good reasons to pay more attention to Riddell’s work: not only do her novels challenge the distinctions between literary and financial writings, they also “show the effects of seemingly abstract financial legislation on the everyday lives of common people,” bringing the City into contact with the home (205). Narin Hassan leaves central London far behind in her examination of the “colonial medical markets” established by female travelers. Drawing her conclusions from the travel writings of women like Lucie Duff Gordon (writing about Egypt) and Isabel Burton (writing about the Middle East), Hassan argues that “Doctoring allowed women to participate in and build medical markets overseas while distributing common tinctures and remedies brought from Britain to the colonies” (208).

Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi’s and Patricia Zakreski’s edited collection, *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century*, is a fine complement to *Economic Women*. Like Dalley’s and Rappoport’s text, it focuses exclusively on the middle-class woman, but more specifically, the essays in this volume explore women’s creative labor – their work in arts and crafts industries – and the way female artists contributed to notions of professionalism, challenged the dichotomous distinction between art and industry, and influenced the valuation of

artistic labor. The three sections into which Hadjiafxendi and Zakreski divide their collection reflect different ways women negotiated livelihoods in the arts. Part I focuses on "industrious amateurs" whose artistic work at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries laid a foundation for later women artists. The essay that begins this section, Talia Schaffer's "Women's Work: The History of Victorian Domestic Handicraft," traces a history of early women's handicraft (with particular attention to the craft exhibitions at the Great Exhibition), which illuminates the complex relationship it had with mass-produced work. Not just the opposite of industrial work, women's crafts were an "antidote," and "rival" at the same time they "emulated those commodities" (29). The next three essays, John Plunkett's examination of late eighteenth-century handcrafted transparencies, Elizabeth Morgan's study of the role of the keyboard etude in music pedagogy for women, and Alice Barnaby's exploration of women's use of muslin in fashion and interior spaces, each offer insight into the many ways women subverted notions of proper feminine activities to transform "feminine diversions" and "occupations" into serious artistic endeavors while simultaneously extending their agency (and even their physical bodies, in the case of the pianists Morgan studies).

Part II builds on the volume's earlier essays by tracing various ways women shaped careers and contributed to the late nineteenth-century notion of the professional artist. Each essay examines a facet of professional development, from Catherine Flood's study of the drawings on wood of Florence and Adelaide Claxton – important work which "bordered the realms of both the academic artist and the mechanical artisan" (108) – to Anne Anderson's exploration of the significance of exhibiting both amateur and professional china painting together at Howell and James's "Royal Academy of China Painting." In both Zakreski's contribution to the volume and Pamela Nunn's essay, "Dorothy's Career and Other Cautionary Tales," the focus is on art education's role in professionalization. Zakreski argues that women who studied design principles saw the friction between the technical

constraints of design and their creativity as a parallel to their roles as both women and artists. Nunn calls necessary attention to the unevenness of the progress toward women's professional recognition. She raises speculations about the value of the Royal Academy's 1894 decision to grant women life studies as a sign of the legitimization of the professional female artist. Nunn argues, "an examination of the culture of the years 1893 and 1894 reveals, contradictorily, vigorous promotion of the creative female as an amateur who must ever struggle to realise her talent, who would always feature naturally in the domestic or personal sphere but awkwardly or unconvincingly beyond the home" (168).

The volume's final section focuses on issues of professional reputation, influence, and canonization. Examining George Eliot's and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's public reputations, Hadjiafxendi argues, "reveals [renown's] destabilising effect upon mid-Victorian women's authorial identities, and can help us rethink how the process of professionalisation was shaped in response to, and through, the intense personalisation of the figure of the author" (188). Similarly, Andrew King's essay on Ouida looks at how she deliberately meditates on the status of the female artist in *Ariadne: The Story of a Dream*. In this work, King traces a trajectory in which "Ouida gradually moved from a commercial conception and practice of art, which disavowed its commercial nature, to a political, altruistic, view and practice where the artwork's impact upon society was more important" (209). While King's work suggests ways to read Ouida outside of her status as a commercial artist, Valerie Sanders undertakes a case study of Marian Huxley Collier – painter, daughter of Thomas Henry Huxley, wife of John Collier – partly in order to explore why she has received almost no scholarly attention at all. Sanders's recovery project has wider application, as she uses the particulars of Collier's career to examine the way 1880s female artists were considered in the art industry. In the volume's final essay, "Michael Field, Aestheticism and Dress," Ana Parejo Vadillo assesses the aunt and niece team Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper in the context of *fin de siècle* aestheticism. Drawing on their descriptions and

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assessments of fashion from their diary, Vadillo argues that clothing to them was art personified; dress was a way to declare their "oppositional aesthetics to mass culture" (245).

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Work Cited

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