

**Real Housewives of Victorian England**

[\*Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture.\*](#)

Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport, eds. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013. 238 pp.

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<1>*Economic Women* takes as its premise the idea of posing an alternative to the well-known character of Homo Economicus, or Economic Man: a figure whose status as a measure of all things economic has rarely been questioned on the grounds of gender exclusivity. Students of nineteenth-century history know the reason why: women's domain was the home, the private realm from which the most familiar forms of economic activity were long assumed to be absent. Scholarship of the past several decades has, of course, demolished this assumption, demonstrating the household's key role in the Victorian economy and situating women as economic actors in roles that both register their participation in the male-dominated economy and suggest alternative figurations of the economic idea (the sympathy economy, the gossip economy). This volume includes examples along both those lines, and seeks in addition to break down easily available classifications by crossing conventional boundaries while bringing new kinds of activity into the realm of economics. The collection showcases Victorian women and fictional characters whose financial dealings and roles within various kinds of economies challenge social and sometimes legal expectations of "ladies' work." Traditionally feminine fields, such as the charity bazaar, figure in and sometimes alter conventional financial contexts, we learn, while fictional treatments of unconventional material—such as Charlotte Riddell's "City" novels—disrupt boundaries of genre as well as gender.

<2>Alternating between historical and literary-critical materials, the collection begins with Kathryn Gleadle's essay on the "moral economy" she finds outlined in Katherine Plymley's diaries. Focusing on issues of family consumption, the essay tells the story of the daughter Jane, who in response to public debate about food shortages limited her own diet to the point of starvation. An essay by Leslee Thorne-Murphy follows, bringing the economic issues of the charity bazaar to bear on Harriet Martineau's *Dawn Island* (1845), while Ilana Blumberg writes provocatively about hoarding and sacrifice in *Romola* (1862-3). Mary Poovey describes the way Florence Nightingale's graphic representations of data about the Crimean War bridged the gap

between observation and knowledge. Constructing an intriguing argument about the relation between spatial representation and forms of literary character, Poovey argues that Martineau shapes Nightingale's observations into character types.

<3>Given its painful topic, Gleadle's writing seems strangely bloodless; what the essay calls Jane's "food denial" fits uneasily, to my mind, within the category of moral response, and the few examples she offers of the diary's own prose, along with the essay's own sustained neutral tone (Jane's response is called an example of "complicated female subjectivities" (38); "an informed response to contemporary economic issues" (40)) seems emotionally detached from the way female charitable sentiment is, in this case, enlisted in the service of a culturally-induced "horror" of food. The writing in this section is, generally, similarly unleavened by interpretation or, dare I say, wit; when Poovey quotes Florence Nightingale on the way Adolphe Quetelet's views about "regularity" "make[s] our hair stand on end" (92), the touch of levity comes as a welcome, though unacknowledged, relief. This discursive neutrality disappears, however, in the writerly pleasures of two contributions—Gordon Bigelow's essay on *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and Deanna Kreisel's on *Dracula* (1897). Discussing what he calls "the social meanings of valuable things" (99), Bigelow argues that *Middlemarch's* treatment of objects shows that desires shape the market, rather than vice versa, thus contradicting William Jevons' marginal utility theory. The novel's characters, Bigelow posits, shape their desires in relation to the wishes and needs of others, and therefore desire is never unitary, never crafted in isolation, and cannot be explained by the familiar calculus of pleasure and pain. Kreisel offers up a lively account of Stoker's Lucy Westenra in relation to the concept of marginal utility—Jevons again—showing how her character erases the difference between consumer and consumed. Collapsing the difference between the taker and the taken, Lucy—and Kreisel—expose this brand of Victorian economics as the fantasy of a closed system, with consumption filling the gaps it creates.

<4>As the volume shifts back to history, Janette Rutterford tells the story of Emily, the Marchioness of Westmeath (d. 1858), whose married life contravenes standard accounts of the financial stability women were said to find in marriage. Rutterford helpfully details the effects of coverture within marriage and after separation, showing how difficult it could be for wives to obtain any money whatsoever. The point here, as in many of the other essays in this volume, is to demonstrate the individual woman's resourcefulness: in this case, the many inventive ways the Marchioness devised to drum up money in the absence of her husband's support. In a scenario that reads like a "Real Housewives" episode, Emily runs up her husband's debt; becomes a lady-in-waiting; invests in British and overseas bonds, and exploits various forms of familial connection, including inheritance. Some of the story's more interesting aspects seem to be buried between the lines—how it came to be that Emily complained of being a "pauper" when she was anything but, for instance; or why Emily and her friend Eliza Caton "were not

afraid to buy stocks that today would terrify us with their volatility” (142). The fearlessness of both seems to be the result of an ample financial cushion already accumulated; Eliza, we are told, does it “for fun” (141). Eliza’s letters, indeed, suggest a certain degree of intrigue: Rutterford quotes her, and Emily as well, warning of the need for “secrecy” in their financial dealings. Was there a subculture of women investing secretly and/or “for fun,” one wonders, and what happened to them and their money? Giving voice to another subculture, Rappaport analyzes a series of 1868 letters from the *Daily Telegraph*, debating the relative merits, in economic terms, of marriage and celibacy.

<5>Several essays take a conventionally feminist approach to Victorian fiction. In her essay on *The Woman in White* (1859-60), for instance, Esther Godfrey argues that fear of Laura Glyde’s financial independence motivates much of the plot, while in Ellen Wood’s *St. Martin’s Eve* (1866), Tara MacDonald proposes, the gossip economy opposes the patriarchal system of inheritance. Wood’s “gossipy” narrative voice, MacDonald adds, advances her own economic interests by seeking to shape her readers as a community. Nancy Henry’s essay on Charlotte Riddell more adventurously attributes critical neglect of that novelist to the violation of genre boundaries constituted by her treatment of business and finance as novelistic material. Telling stories of “City men,” Henry writes, Riddell viewed businessmen as “men of action” and “turned lack of introspection into a virtue” (197). Henry contrasts Riddell’s popularity among her contemporaries with her later critical neglect, positing that modern criticism is wedded to the notion that realist fiction must take a critical attitude toward the financial sphere. Finally—moving back to history—in an informative account of the circulation of medical knowledge by British women travelers, Narin Hassan discusses how women created a unique colonial market for medical treatment and information, as well as a new figure: the “doctress.” Shedding new light on neglected figures such as Isabel Burton (1831-1896), wife of the celebrated traveler, Hassan demonstrates that traveling women not only fashioned a new economy, but responded to the economics of medicine in Britain by constructing new identities elsewhere: identities that were in this case “hybrids” of professional medical work and domestic labor. An afterword by Reginia Gagnier brings the volume’s concerns to bear on life in the twenty-first century, noting the persistence of gender inequality and the high proportion of women now living in poverty. Economic change, she suggests, to the extent that it has occurred for women, has not led to political change, and “Economic Women still have some way to go to equal Economic Man” (224).

<6>Gagnier’s brief polemic, along with a few other contributions, stands out amidst a generally muted tone: a tendency to subordinate the unusual qualities of many of the lives (and characters) discussed to conventional interpretations of the way gender differences play out. Some of these strange and wonderful stories, that is, seem diminished by the familiar and sometimes repetitive frameworks within which they are placed. Having read this book, I have a

fuller sense of the varieties of “economic women” than I had before, and the book deserves credit for bringing them to our attention. But the exciting discovery of all these new persons, characters, and voices—as well as a new field of scholarly investigation—could have been conveyed with a bit more excitement.