

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Special Issue:

Illustration and Gender: Drawing the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by Kate Holterhoff and Nicole Lobdell

## **Illustration and Gender: Drawing the Nineteenth Century**

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<1> Illustrated texts are deceptive. By enacting their content simultaneously in two modes, they require a reader to negotiate the divide between modes, always with the knowledge that something may be lost, or left out, in the translation from word to image or between text and paratext. Illustrations themselves are complex; they are not mere copies of written texts. Instead, they adapt texts, adding their own, sometimes contradictory, content. As a result, contemporary literary critics have tended to sideline illustrations, treating them as tangential to the written text, while art historians have ignored them for being lowbrow, unimaginative, or merely commercial. The relationship of the humanities to illustration is fraught but, as this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* demonstrates, it is often through the medium of illustration that the nineteenth century confronted such controversial subjects as gender, race, and class.

<2> Facilitated by new and improved industrial and print technologies, such as wood engravings, the rotary press, better stereotype plates, and electrotyping, nineteenth-century illustrations gained both speed and currency, quickly becoming the tools of news, commerce, and empire. Within this history, gender occupies an important and provocative place, as printing and illustration created new opportunities for women to become more active participants in the creation of visual texts. In “Defining Illustration Studies” (2012), Paul Goldman explains that, although women were infrequently credited as artists, the engravers responsible for translating designs into printable block form were “thought to have been poorly paid women working from home, at speed and sometimes overnight, [and they] are almost never recorded by name” (31). Women have played an all-but invisible role in the history of illustration.

<3> In *The Illustrator in America, 1880-1980* (1984), Walt Reed and Roger Reed provide biographies for 96 artists between the years 1880-1910, but only 11 of these are women. More significantly, in Simon Houfe’s *Dictionary of British Book Illustrators and Caricaturists, 1800-1914* (1981), women account for approximately 225 out of the 2,500 named artists of British books and periodicals.<sup>(1)</sup> Many of the women in Houfe’s dictionary are labeled as amateur artists, and their biographies tend to be

frustratingly incomplete. Playing off of art historian and feminist scholar Linda Nochlin's important rhetorical question, gender studies scholars are tempted to ask, why have there been no, or so few, great women illustrators? In response, we have devoted this special issue not only to the significance of gender in popular illustrated fictions and periodicals, but also to the presence and rise of professional female illustrators.

<4> Nineteenth-century illustration is transcontinental and transatlantic, with the publication histories of British and American illustration tied particularly tightly. Amy Tucker argues that, "American versions of the European literary magazines began to take shape . . . in a period of economic prosperity following the Civil War" (3). Although the proliferation of printing technologies was truly international, with Germany and France playing major roles, British and American printers constantly shared illustrators and technologies.<sup>(2)</sup> In fact, according to Neil Harris, the skill and style of American illustrators in the 1890s overtook their British and continental peers, leading to their greater popularity and commercial success. Harris calls "American illustrators the envy of their European counterparts" owing to their "skill," "originality," and "personal style" (339). Towards the end of the century, American presses were willing to pay top dollar for good illustrations, frequently outpacing their British counterparts. Henry Mills Alden, the editor of *Harper's Magazine* from 1869 to 1919, wrote that during the *fin de siècle*, "the prizes of periodical literature rapidly increased—more rapidly in America than in England" (88). In recognition of this transatlanticism, this special issue includes articles concerned with both British and American illustrators.

<5> Few aspects relating to the study of illustrations can remain hermetically situated within a single discipline. The contemporary study of illustration is innately interdisciplinary, combining aspects of art and print history, and cultural, media, and literary studies, as recent publications demonstrate. In addition to J. R. Harvey's classic study *Victorian Novelists and Their Illustrators* (1970), more recent studies of illustration and the nineteenth century have included Brian Maidment's *Reading Popular Prints, 1790-1870* (1996) and *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order, 1820-1850* (2012), Catherine Golden's edited collection *Book Illustrated: Text, Image, and Culture 1770-1930* (2000), Rosemary Mitchell's *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image, 1830-1870* (2000), Richard Maxwell's edited collection *The Victorian Illustrated Book* (2002), *The Lure of Illustration in the Nineteenth Century — Picture and Press* (2009) edited by Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, Simon Cooke's *Illustrated Periodicals of the 1860s: Contexts and Collaborations* (2010), *Reading Victorian Illustration, 1855-1875* (2012) edited by Paul Goldman and Simon Cooke, and Adam Sonstegard's *Artistic Liberties: American Literary Realism and Graphic Illustration, 1880-1905* (2014). Recent illustration scholars have also attended to gender in several ways. The highly feminized Victorian literary annual has received a great deal of scholarly attention, most recently in Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing: The Illustrated Gift Book and Victorian Visual Culture, 1855-1875* (2011) and Katherine D. Harris's *Forget Me Not: The Rise of the British Literary Annual, 1823-1835* (2015). Critical biographies of individual female illustrators, such as Kate Greenaway, Christina Rossetti, and Beatrix Potter, also contribute to discourses on illustration and gender, although they are sometimes limited in scope as they pertain to the larger field of illustration studies.

<6> An online literary and cultural studies journal is a particularly appropriate forum for this special issue because the study of nineteenth-century illustration, as a discipline, is rapidly evolving online. There has been a recent influx of new digital projects and research groups; among them are the Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration (DMVI), online since 2007, the Romantic Illustration Network (RIN), begun in 2014, and The Illustration Archive, which went online in March 2015. The Illustration Archive allows users to browse, search, and tag more than a million book illustrations held in the British Library — for free. This archive represents an enormous step in bringing lost and forgotten illustrations back to the attention of contemporary scholars and the public at large. Julia Thomas, Professor of English literature at Cardiff University and one of the leaders behind this undertaking, states that the archive “has the potential to revolutionize how illustration is understood and the importance accorded to it, to supply an image-hungry commercial world with illustrative material, and to lead to ever more accurate ways of classifying and analyzing images in large databases” (“Illustration Archive”). The inaccessibility of images has long been a problem for scholars interested in the connections between illustration studies and other disciplines including history, gender and literary studies, and journalism. These new digital endeavors open promising new avenues for scholars interested in the study of illustration and its applications. The importance of digital databases in recovering the lost histories and forgotten biographies of individual illustrators, especially women illustrators, cannot be overstated.

<7> Nineteenth-century women artists encountered unique challenges that did not affect their male counterparts. In Britain, aspiring female artists struggled to acquire proper arts training. While co-education in general was rare, the fields of fine arts and medicine enforced gender-based separation in the classroom. Therefore, many women studied art privately (often at great expense), or entirely forewent the structured art education vouchsafed to men. Even after the Royal Academy Schools, which boasted free tuition, opened to women artists in 1860, they did not permit women to attend figure-drawing courses until the twentieth century. This incomplete course access caused rifts in women’s education. Drawing from nude models was a particularly inflammatory issue. Art historian Deborah Cherry explains: “[t]he struggles by women for access to life-drawing . . . represented not only women’s rights to that specialist training which underwrote professional success but more importantly they registered a challenge to the predominant regimes of representation and signification” (55). Unfortunately, the barriers to proper training experienced by women artists were only a prelude to later professional hurdles to success.

<8> Despite there being “two women members . . . at its foundation in 1768,” women artists were barred from membership in the Royal Academy throughout the nineteenth century (Cherry 65). Cherry reveals that in the following century, “the Royal Academy of Arts remained exclusively male. . . . From the 1840s onwards several attempts were made to secure the election of women artists. Elizabeth Thompson (later Lady Butler) was nominated three times between 1879 and 1881” but to no avail (65). This exclusion limited the ability of women to market their works at annual exhibitions and prevented them from receiving teaching positions. Perhaps the most insidious repercussion of this exclusion was its effectual positioning of women artists as perpetual amateurs rather than professionals. Likeminded all-male arts organizations such as the Langham Sketching Club, and even the Society of Portrait Painters, which extended membership to women but barred them from voting, served to create an unequal and

even hostile atmosphere for female artists. This information does much to explain the preponderance of amateur female illustrators listed in Houfe's *Dictionary*.

<9> Despite these social limitations, nineteenth-century women artists actively advocated to legitimize their livelihoods. In 1856, Harriet Grote (1792–1878) and Barbara Bodichon (1827-91) founded the Society for Female Artists (SFA), which held its first show in London the following year. Although discrimination against what *Punch* termed “the Ladies’ *debüt* in the artistic world” was rampant, this organization made significant strides in the professionalization of women in the arts (27). Of equal importance was the 1859 petition to the Royal Academy, authored by 38 prominent women artists, for the acceptance of women to study in the Royal Academy Schools. Although the academy continued to refuse women admission until 1922, the petition was popular and counted among its signatories the artists such as Barbara Bodichon, Eliza Florence Bridell Fox (1823/24-1903), and the successful book illustrator Florence Claxton (fl.1855-79), who is the subject of Susan Walton’s article. As Patricia Smith Scanlan will demonstrate, while the United States did not boast a precisely analogous institution to Britain’s Royal Academy, women artists in America experienced many of the same educational and professional hardships as those in Britain.

<10> This special issue aims in part to highlight the great number of women artists and illustrators who, despite the disadvantages imposed upon them, thrived in the professional art market during the nineteenth century. Each of the authors explores gender as intrinsically tied to questions surrounding nineteenth-century illustration as a visual art and a profession. Moving beyond the more popular, male illustrators of novels, such as those employed by Dickens, and illustrated periodicals such as *Punch*, the authors in this special issue examine lesser known, or entirely forgotten, illustrators, most of them female, responsible for drawing the figures and images that impacted societal and cultural perceptions of gender in the nineteenth century.

<11> We begin our issue with a theoretical engagement with illustration and gender, and our only male artist. Nancy Marck Cantwell’s article “Waist Not, Want Not: The Corseted Body and Empire in *Vanity Fair*” examines images of corseted bodies, both masculine and feminine ones, in William Makepeace Thackeray’s novel. Cantwell argues not only that characters’ bodies and dress offer up critiques of race and gender but also that the contraction or expansion associated with a corseted or uncorseted body echoes ambitions of both imperial expansion and colonial control. *Vanity Fair* presents an interesting case study for illustration studies because of Thackeray’s dual roles as both author and illustrator. His self-designed images function as a paratext to the novel, and Cantwell’s attention to the tension between the visual and written texts suggests that Thackeray’s critique of empire exists in a dialogue between the two. Cantwell reads the corset as indicative of military and domestic affairs; her attention to military dress and its incorporation of the military corset, a descendent of the cuirass, is particularly suggestive for the links between dress, empire, and masculine and feminine bodies.

<12> That Thackeray illustrated his own novel speaks to the importance of maintaining the illustrated portions of texts as an indelible part of the novel reading experience, and our next article comments on the same issue. In “Suitable Work for Women? Florence Claxton’s Illustrations for *The Clever Woman of the Family* by Charlotte Yonge,” Susan Walton revisits the twelve illustrations Claxton executed to

accompany the initial serial publication of Yonge's popular novel. Walton argues for a reexamination of Yonge's work within its historical and artistic context. Claxton is a compelling choice of artist because of her status as a professional illustrator and her endorsement of women illustrators receiving the same artistic training as their male counterparts. In fact, one of the plotlines of Yonge's novel focuses on female engravers and their production of wood engravings. Walton's close examination of Claxton's twelve illustrations results in new interpretations of the novel's themes, as well as revealing the sometimes fraught relationships between authors and illustrators.

<13> Questions about women's work and the role of female illustrators in the literary marketplace also inform Adam Sonstegard's article, "Mary Hallock Foote: Reconfiguring *The Scarlet Letter*, Redrawing Hester Prynne." Sonstegard examines Foote's largely ignored 1878 illustrations to Hawthorne's novel, and argues that their digital release on Project Gutenberg in 2008 pushes for a new consideration of the text. Sonstegard connects Foote's illustrations and her career as a graphic artist in nineteenth-century western America with Hester Prynne's needlework and emotional journey in seventeenth-century New England. He uncovers several surprising parallels between protagonist and artist, offering a glimpse into how Foote interprets and draws Prynne as both personal reflection and social commentary on women's roles and women's art. He argues for a reconsideration of Prynne through Foote's artistic lens, suggesting that Foote's designs direct our visual attention away from Prynne, acting against modern cinematic efforts to pull her into the spotlight.

<14> Closing this special issue is Patricia Smith Scanlan's article "'God-gifted girls': The Rise of Women Illustrators in Late Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia." Scanlan, an art historian, offers a survey of female illustrators in late nineteenth-century Philadelphia, a place and time that Scanlan describes as pivotal in the professionalization of illustration. She reveals how domestic cooperatives of female illustrators developed and were largely responsible for helping female artists find professional success in a male-dominated industry. Scanlan's work offers a fuller picture of the rapidly evolving field of illustration at the turn of the twentieth century, illuminating how women artists navigated the boundaries between illustration and traditional fine arts, personal and professional identities, and domestic and studio spaces. Focusing her attention on a small number of successful female artists living and working in Philadelphia, such as Alice Barber Stephens, whose illustrations for *Stark Munro Letters* were praised by Arthur Conan Doyle, Scanlan demonstrates how these relatively unknown women artists were leaders in the illustration of popular fiction in America.

<15> Together, these articles historicize, contextualize, and theorize the close relationships between illustrators and their subjects. Cantwell demonstrates how an author rewrites himself through self-illustration; Walton and Sonstegard draw out intricate connections between illustrators and their fictional protagonists; and, Scanlan reveals the most successful Philadelphia women illustrators were those whose realistic depictions of feminine subjects empathized with the roles and tasks of everyday women. Contributing to the expanding field of illustration studies, each of these articles demonstrates that there are many avenues by which we can explore the relationships between nineteenth-century illustrations and gender studies, revealing the many opportunities for continued research.

## Endnotes

(1) Many illustrators' first names are identified by initials alone, making it impossible to identify their gender. This intentional obfuscation of identity warrants further study. ([^](#))

(2) For print histories of these nations see, Haynes *passim*; Ward *passim*. For a classic theoretical approach to the international scope of print, and especially "print-capitalism" (36) in Europe see Anderson 1-9; 37-46. ([^](#))

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