

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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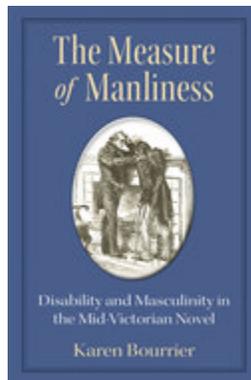
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Special Issue:

Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

Guest Edited by Lara Karpenko and Lauri Dietz

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### **The New Woman as Graduate? Reassessing the Educated Working Woman**

[\*In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain, 1870-1914\*](#). Gillian Sutherland. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 187 pp.

Reviewed by [Emma Liggins](#), Manchester Metropolitan University

<1>The New Woman as a construction of 1890s journalism, recognisable in *Punch* cartoons because of markers such as her bicycle, her pince-nez and her bloomers, is now a familiar figure in nineteenth-century gender studies. Feminist scholars have addressed the related emergence of the New Woman heroine from a number of perspectives, tracing her links to the developing suffrage movement, to the partial legitimisation of women's place in the public sphere, to emerging theories of psychoanalysis and to debates about female sexuality at the fin-de-siècle. Gillian Sutherland's timely new study reminds us of the importance of women's entry into higher education and the professions in the formation of the New Woman, urging us to rethink what exactly was 'new' about the behavior and economic circumstances of women labelled in this way. Tracing a trajectory from the 1870s, when middle-class women first entered the new women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge and studied at the University of London, to their mass entry into the labor market and their involvement in war work, allows

Sutherland to pose different questions about the ambiguous figure described by Clara Collet, the social investigator, as 'the educated working woman'. This widening of the time-frame allows the New Woman to be repositioned in relation to developing nineteenth-century debates and concerns about women's work, particularly the struggle to reconcile economic independence with constraining ideologies of femininity and the family. The study also demands a reconsideration of issues of class, focusing particularly on 'the power and resonances of the divide between ladies and women and the possibilities for narrowing and crossing it' (14-15).

<2>In considering the New Woman credentials of a number of middle-class British women, both familiar and unfamiliar, the study sets out to question how far the major changes in the provision of education in nineteenth-century Britain were catalysts for future changes in women's employment and, to a lesser extent, marital status. It begins with an analysis of the occupations of former students of Girton and Newnham, based on Sutherland's own database, compared with existing statistical analysis of Oxford women's colleges to confirm that teaching was by far the most popular destination for female graduates. She then returns to questions about spinsterhood and higher education being investigated in the 1890s, such as: 'did women with higher education intimidate or repel potential marriage partners?' (34). The diaries and letters of writers such as Ada Radford, social investigators such as Clara Collet and Octavia Hill, and teachers such as Etta Dan and Mary Hatch, as well as countless others, provide rich source material for such an enquiry, allowing Sutherland to compare varied experiences of the professional and married lives of university-educated women. It's also interesting to see what these women read, as this correspondence often indicates the political and literary texts such women were particularly interested in, and how this might have led to greater political involvement. The study builds on the archival scholarship of feminist historians such as Lee Holcombe, Carol Dyhouse and Alison Oram, and their work on the battle against distinctions of sex in women's experiences of higher education and the workplace; the figure of the spinster teacher, as analysed by Oram and others, is a particularly suggestive figure who also appeared in many literary texts of this period. 'As a group,' argues Sutherland, 'women teachers 'look stronger candidates for the label "New Women" than many of their graduate sisters' (132), not least because of their formal training and the opportunities to which this led. How this emphasis on the woman teacher might alter current understandings of the New Woman is a resonant question. There is clearly much more work to be done on the forgotten lives of teachers, clerks and civil servants, and the growth of white-collar work for women up to 1914.

<3>The chapter on art, literature and the theater poses some interesting questions in relation to the pursuit of routes into acting and artistic careers, following on from the statistics about low graduate employment in these areas. There is a nice discussion here of the visibility of women artists, writers and actresses and their sometimes uneasy occupation of the public sphere, though some of the material on New Woman writers such as Amy Levy and Olive Schreiner and 'the boundaries of respectable behaviour' on the London streets is quite well-known. Perhaps the most resonant chapter in the study is that addressing the lady/woman distinction and its relevance to the changing class structure, an ongoing enquiry which looks back to Holcombe's discussions about 'work fit for ladies' in her 1973 study.<sup>(1)</sup> We still do not have satisfactory answers to the pertinent questions Sutherland poses about how respectability through paid work might help some to cross the uncertain boundary between the two

terms. As she asks, 'was respectability for women but a pale imitation of ladyhood? Or are we seeing among white-collar women workers the first emergence of distinctively feminine versions of respectability?' (134). There is some thought-provoking material in this chapter about the rules of chaperonage in the Oxbridge women's colleges, and on dress for students. Sutherland identifies 'the slow process of change, the gradual move towards occupational rather than class- and gender-based descriptors ... fed by multiple shifts in the social structure' (153) whereby the distinction between lady and woman gradually became redundant, though it is right to point out that this is clearly an area for more research. The ways in which war work challenged understandings and experiences of women's training and economic independence, and the decline of domestic service, could certainly shed new light on this slow process of change.

<4>One of the possible flaws in the argument is the uncertainty around the way in which the term New Woman is being deployed. In the conclusion Sutherland rightly asserts that 'the relationships between the caricature of the New Woman and its attendant rhetoric, and the actual lives of middle-class women in the period, are complex and nuanced,' but then goes on to argue that 'labelling these women as either New Women or failed New Women is a profoundly ahistorical activity' (165), as if the category itself becomes redundant. This echoes comments from earlier chapters whereby individuals are shown as not meeting the criteria for this label, or can only at best be described as 'Newish.' The need to move beyond the caricatures of the 'media feeding frenzy' surrounding the New Woman in the 1890s, and to focus more attention on white-collar workers, 'more plausible candidates for the label "New Women"' (161) is convincingly argued throughout, but a bit more was needed on the criteria for such labelling. The tendency to dismiss journalism as ephemeral and frothy, despite drawing on key debates featured in nineteenth-century journals, also seems a bit contradictory.

<5>Notwithstanding these reservations, the study urges us to rethink the phenomenon of the New Woman and question our readiness to apply the term, reminding us to look beyond the *Punch* caricatures and the alarmist headlines to the lived experiences of the first generation of middle-class women to benefit from a university education. Historians will be particularly interested in Sutherland's revealing case studies of the white-collar worker and her education and social networks. I was fascinated by the stories of close friends Ruth Slate and Eva Slawson, whose correspondence between 1903 and 1916 shows how they were able to benefit from evening classes, night school and chapel structures before their involvement with Quaker groups, and political organisations such as the Progressive Thought League, the Women's Freedom League and the Freewoman Discussion Circle. Both women emerged as committed pacifists after 1914. Such case studies indicate the importance of examining the ways in which women's education enabled them to develop their social networking, and the extent to which it facilitated a real change in their career opportunities and political involvement. As Sutherland notes, there is also more work to be done in 'hunting out the records and school magazines of provincial girls' secondary schools, particularly those created by LEAs after 1902, and trying to discover how many of their old girls went on to employment and what they did' (113). Certainly, the education and employment histories, as well as the 'Newness', of women in local government, women in religious organisations, the suffragist or suffragette, white-collar workers and women war workers, to name but a few, deserve much more attention. The implications of Sutherland's lucid discussions of

ladies, women, freedom and respectability have much broader relevance to ongoing debates within nineteenth-century studies and beyond about women's work and its complex relation to class.

#### Endnotes

(1) Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales, 1850-1914* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1973), 3. ([^](#))