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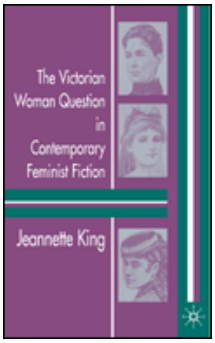

Rewriting the Victorian Woman in Contemporary Feminist Fiction

The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction. Jeannette King. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 210 pp.

Reviewed by Amanda Mordavsky, University of Sheffield

<1>The increased popularity of the historical novel over the last twenty years has changed the face of feminist popular fiction. Authors such as Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and Sarah Waters have set their novels in the nineteenth century by way of reconsidering the Victorian "woman question" as a context for contemporary feminism. Whilst critical essays have addressed the historical issues raised in these novels, Jeannette King's *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* is the first critical work to consider them in light of their exploration of feminism's origins. King's distinction between "the woman question" and feminism relies on both time periods and genders; the woman question is considered as a Victorian issue dealt with by men, whilst feminism is seen as a contemporary issue dealt with by women. The result is an interesting study for scholars of contemporary literature but one that is one-sided in its consideration of Victorian gender issues.

<2> The book's six chapters address topics such as femininity, evolution, mental deviation in criminals and idiots, spiritualism, degeneration, and race. With the exception of the first, each chapter discusses one of the themes as a Victorian context and then applies this historical analysis to contemporary feminist fiction. This format helps King effectively consider the woman question thematically and historically, analyzing and comparing texts that are not traditionally considered together. Moreover, her division of themes roughly follows the chronological progression of the treatment of the woman question in the Victorian period which aids King in explaining Victorian understandings of gender and, to a lesser extent, how such Victorian legacies have influenced feminism today.

<3> The initial chapter discusses Victorian constructions of femininity. This chapter is subdivided into five sections devoted to religious, biological, psychological, and Darwinian approaches to understanding women, with the final section discussing how such discourses influenced the period's debates over gender. As King draws on various historical, scientific and literary sources, she reiterates familiar arguments regarding the construction of femininity, including the view of the ideal woman as a passionless moral influence on man. However, the chapter does produce some less recognizable arguments, particularly with regard to women's relationship to nature and society. King argues that in the Victorian period, "woman's essential character was determined by Nature, but the ideal of womanhood could be achieved only by conforming to the patriarchal structures evolved over the centuries" (29). This conflict between female nature and social expectations is one that the book addresses in light of the Victorian depictions in contemporary feminist novels and, to a lesser extent, present-day women.

<4> The next chapter discusses contemporary fiction from the vantage of Victorian evolutionary theories and the male understanding of women to which they contributed. King relies heavily on Darwin's writings to describe how women were viewed as less evolved than men, an approach that, for all its considerable interest, neglects other scientists who considered gender evolution, most notably T.H. Huxley. King does, however, integrate modern critiques of Darwin, including Fiona Erskine's "The *Origin of Species* and the Science of Female Inferiority" (1995), in which Erskine argues that Darwin first considered the differences between genders in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and not, as was previously thought, in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). King clearly outlines how the Victorians saw men as stronger than their predecessors because of their competition for women, and women as evolved "for the single specialized function of motherhood" (38). The chapter then considers how these Darwinian ideals are evident in Andrew Barrett's *The Voyage of the Narwhal, 1855-1856* and A.S. Byatt's *Morpho Eugenia*, two novels that explicitly address Victorian debates over evolution. King draws parallels

between these two novels as each challenges nineteenth-century views on women. Whilst both novels acknowledge the unfair treatment of women which scientific theories encouraged, the authors undermine the authority of such discourses through the deliberate feminist representation of highly evolved female characters.

<5> King next turns to criminality and idiocy understood from the vantage of gender. This chapter is one of the strongest in the book, making substantial use of Victorian sociological and scientific works to demonstrate the links between moral depravity and female sexuality. King successfully avoids relying on Cesare Lombroso's works, instead drawing on equally important but sometimes undervalued figures such as Frances Power Cobbe, Robert Brudenell Carter, and William Acton. The chapter outlines the perceived links between deviance and female sexuality, particularly through discourses regarding hysteria. King explains that for the Victorians, "the path from hysteria to degeneracy and even criminality was all too smooth, particularly for the lower classes" (68). The result of this degeneracy was generally prostitution or criminality, both of which are issues in the contemporary novels King considers in this chapter: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters's *Affinity*. Both novels consider how a male-centered view of gender permeates the supposed objectivity in the judicial system. Moreover, both novels deal with sexualized women who are drawn together because of their sexuality and are subsequently punished. The bond between these women, however, proves to be a threat to patriarchy and becomes one of the male fears of the period. Although King does not argue for an explicit connection between this representation of Victorian women and contemporary feminism, she does describe the treatment of female sexuality and solidarity in our own day.

<6> The male fear of female solidarity reappears in another strong chapter devoted to spiritualism and sexual desire. King considers how spiritualism initially was and can be seen as a reinforcement of female submissiveness because of the medium's passivity toward and receptivity of the spirits. However, when reconsidered, the female medium is actually an image of power; King notes, "the medium's surrender to possession by a spirit paradoxically grants her immense power – not only the power to cross the barriers between the living and the dead, but also the power to influence the beliefs and feelings of the living" (94). Moreover, a woman's position as a medium provided her with an acceptable public sphere, a sphere which otherwise did not effectively exist. The chapter considers how three contemporary feminist novels, Victoria Glendinning's *Electricity*, A.S. Byatt's *The Conjugial Angel*, and Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen*, apply this dichotomy of spiritualism to the sexual liberation of women. King concludes that whilst all three novels allow for the initial submissiveness of the medium, spiritualism ultimately serves as a social and sexual outlet for the main female characters.

<7> In her penultimate chapter, King returns to anxieties regarding female sexuality, paying particular attention to the degeneration debates of the *fin de siècle*. Whilst these anxieties were based on supposedly scientific information, they were applied to the social situation of women. Male figures such as Karl Pearson argued that women who invaded the male public sphere threatened the continuation of heterosexual marriage by asserting their independence or choosing female partners. Lombroso and Havelock Ellis discussed physical and mental signs of degeneration in women, including the appearance of masculine features, as yet another threat to female sexuality and the social institution of marriage. King relates these anxieties to two contemporary novels, Angela Carter's *Night at the Circus* and Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*, both of which overtly apply twentieth-century feminism to the 1890s context in which the novels are set. King explores how both novels represent female degeneration through sexuality but how this proves to be a means for the women to transcend the social norms. Ultimately, as the chapter concludes, the women "'perform' gender in defiance of prevailing norms, and yet ultimately evade the disciplining effect of Victorian gender discourse" (155).

<8> The final chapter considers the relationship between gender and race theories in the Victorian period. These theories placed white men as the social norm and everything else as (what would later be termed) the "Other." In agreement with previous studies, King maintains that such otherness was perceived as evident in the body and therefore scientists used this physical evidence as a means to explain the inferiority of the "Other." The chapter discusses these discourses in relation to black women and their treatment in Victorian America and then applies such contexts to an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. King argues that whilst the novel initially adheres to a hierarchical view of races, it ultimately undermines it through its representations of the black female and white male. Whereas the woman of color is represented as evolved because of her emotional development and her desire for education, the white male is ultimately portrayed as an uncivilized animal. Thus, in Morrison as in other novelists' works

ultimately portrayed as an uncivilized animal. Thus, in Morrison as in other novelists' works, contemporary feminist fiction revises Victorian attitudes. Yet, King's final argument is that by enforcing feminist views of gender and race, Morrison challenges both Victorian and contemporary treatment of black women.

<9> Overall, the book's treatment of the woman question is often thorough but pays too little attention to nineteenth-century women writers and, therefore, understates the Victorian era's proto-feminist developments. King ignores the Victorian writings of, for example, New Women writers as well as of female writers who supported the dominant male viewpoint. The result is a one-sided presentation of Victorian contexts which neglects many works that the contemporary writers may have attended when they composed their novels. However, King does draw some parallels between Victorian and contemporary treatment of women, suggesting that the feminist writers she studies are addressing the faults of both present and past. Although it is not a particularly useful source for Victorianists, her study should be of considerable interest to scholars of the novels it discusses.