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Reframing the Classics in Victorian England

Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer. Isobel Hurst. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 253 pp.

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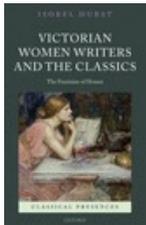
Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 4.1



<1>In the 1980s, a number of books, including Richard Jenkyns' *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) and Frank Turner's *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981), drew attention to the influence of ancient Greek literature, art, and ideas on Victorian writers and thinkers. "Writing about Greece was in part a way for the Victorians to write about themselves," wrote Turner, who noted that "university-educated and other widely read classes of Great Britain often felt that a profoundly intimate relationship existed between themselves and the ancient Greeks."⁽¹⁾ The comment is revealing of the approach adopted by early scholars of Victorian Hellenism, which entailed an almost exclusive emphasis on the interests of upper- and middle-class Victorian men, who, throughout most of the nineteenth century, were the sole occupants of universities in England and most easily qualified as "widely read." Since the 1980s, however, several studies have challenged the idea that intimate relations with the Greeks were solely the provenance of an elite male population. Yopie Prins's luminous *Victorian Sappho* (1999), for instance, discussed reworkings of Sapphic lyrics by the two-woman poetic team known as Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) and emphasized the importance of "the projected fantasy of a female body and a feminine voice" to Victorian imaginings of the Greeks.⁽²⁾ Prins, along with others such as Linda Dowling in *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1994) and Lorna Hardwick in *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (2000), have begun to explore alternate, even transgressive, pathways of antiquity's influence in the modern world.

<2>Isobel Hurst's new book, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer*, is the first comprehensive study of antiquity as it was received and processed by women in nineteenth-century England. Taking into account both Greek and Roman antiquity, Hurst examines the myriad popular channels through which women could access ancient literature and ideas even without a formal university education. These venues included extension lectures, popular translations and reference texts, and classically themed historical novels. The nontraditional ways through which women learned about the classical world, argues Hurst, "made women's responses to the classics distinctive" (2). By "distinctive," Hurst means different from men, insofar as women's energies were not expended on the composition, grammar, and rote-learning conventional to formal classical education but on "translating and understanding Greek and Latin texts" (2). Furthermore, unlike men, women were often burdened by uncertainty "about their linguistic and historical grasp of a subject in which they had little or no formal teaching" (7). But the many informal ways that women learned their Greek and Latin also made their classical knowledge distinctive from one another's, as Hurst emphasizes in her discussion of novelists, poets, and academics, for whom the classics served as keys to expansive and highly individualistic imaginations. By exploring antiquity's influence on a wide range of women writers, instead of discussing only the three conventional female representatives of Victorian Hellenism (i.e., George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Jane Ellen Harrison), Hurst challenges the stereotype that only women with exceptional (read: masculine) intellects could become fluent in ancient languages and suggests instead the scope and diversity of women's classical knowledge.

<3>Hurst succeeds phenomenally in exposing the breadth of classical influence on Victorian women's imaginations. Her six chapters cover a remarkable array of personalities from little-known authors like Netta Syrett to canonical figures like Barrett Browning, from such early nineteenth-century authors as Jane Austen to early Modernists May Sinclair and Vera Brittain.

Especially persuasive is Hurst's emphasis on the role of genre in mediating authors' uses of antiquity. For instance, the discussion of Barrett Browning is framed by the poet's appropriation of epic form in order to "redefine heroism in a way that would allow women to achieve this ideal, and to condemn and perhaps replace stories of war and violence" (113). The discussion of tragedy and the novel in Chapter Five expands on a topic previously discussed by Jenkyns and Jeanette King and is similarly effective in acknowledging motives of individual authors while suggesting the broader impact of classical material on women's changing social status in the nineteenth century. "[There was a] widespread recognition that ancient heroines could speak eloquently of the wrongs of women in a way which resonated with Victorian readers" (164), notes Hurst, gesturing, perhaps, to the comment by Virginia Woolf—whom she considers in her conclusion—that "women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time."³ Also enlightening is Hurst's discussion of the reasons behind women's desires to learn classics and the means through which they fulfilled these desires. In exploring women's friendships and correspondences with one another across space and time as well as men's involvement in helping female relatives and pupils, Hurst reveals the networks of classical knowledge among women while also challenging the notion that classical learning inspired a purely antagonistic relation between the sexes. The impressive breadth of Hurst's reading and research helps to create a wonderful balance between attention to individual motives and a more general emphasis on the role of classics in helping women achieve intellectual authority, social recognition, and self-fulfillment.

<4>The book's ambition is also its weakness, however, as the desire for comprehensiveness leads to over-elaboration at some moments and lack of discrimination between finer points at others. The discussion of conventional men's classical education in the first chapter ("Encounters with the Ancient World"), while informative, is also unnecessarily lengthy with its extensive quotes from novels of the period and excessive examples. Readers could get a more thorough discussion of nineteenth-century classical education and its cultural implications from Christopher Stray's excellent book *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830-1960* (1998). Perhaps more disturbing than the wealth of detail on traditional classical education is the lack of clear distinction between the influences of Hellenism and its Roman counterpart. Past critics have been careful to emphasize the dominance of Hellenism in Victorian curricula and culture, stressing such reasons as the quest for originality and the antipathy toward Catholicism for the ascendancy of Greek studies over Latin from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth. Hurst acknowledges this distinction briefly, noting that "Greek, noticeably foreign and difficult because of the different alphabet which makes it seem like a secret language to the uninitiated, is central to the narrative of women's exclusion from classical study" (5). Besides this provocative comment, however, the distinction between Greek and Latin studies is left largely untheorized, with one or the other singled out at odd moments, only to be reabsorbed into the general discussion of antiquity. Latin, as one comment suggests, is considered only because it reveals the "remarkable range of [classical] themes and images" (5) in women's use of antiquity. A stronger theorization of the distinction between these two ancient cultures as they influenced the Victorians would have helped the argument throughout, as in tracing the implications of why classically themed historical novels typically took place in early Christian Rome, despite the Victorians' growing enchantment with pagan aspects of Greek culture. A discussion here of the tensions between Hellenism and Christianity, instead of a plethora of cursory examples, would have helped to establish a closer dialogue with other critics and better configured the balance between analysis and reportage. A stronger basis for the Greek / Roman contrast would have helped also to strengthen the discussion of individual authors in the latter half of the work and linked these discussions more closely to one another.

<5>*Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* is valuable in stressing the widespread influence of antiquity in Victorian popular culture and in establishing a basis for future work on women's relations with antiquity. As with many pioneering books, it suffers from a diffusiveness born of the need to cover extensive background and to give a sense of the subject's scope. As well, there are some biases on the author's part that somewhat skew the discussion. For instance, there is a curious emphasis on Oxford, which did not open a women's college until 1878, and a relatively dismissive treatment of Cambridge, which opened Girton in 1869 and Newnham in 1871 and housed the leading female classicist of the late Victorian / early Modernist period, Jane Ellen Harrison. However, the bias toward Oxford is perhaps understandable given the author's affiliation, and there is certainly more than enough material here to stress the diffusion of classics throughout Victorian culture. Hurst leaves her readers wondering about the Victorian women without supportive fathers or other male relations to introduce them to the classics and who were forced like Shakespeare's sister to relinquish their potential and disappear from the annals of

history.

Endnotes

(1) Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981) 8, 10. (▲)

(2) Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) 4. (▲)

(3) Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Harcourt, 1929) 43. (▲)

