

Fantastic and Sensational: Representing the Female Body

Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 188 pp.

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<1> Laurence Talairach-Vielmas' *Moulding the Female Body* asserts that Victorian fairy tales and sensation fiction of the 1860s and 1870s revised traditional tales and old plot patterns, bringing them up-to-date with the modern Victorian world, and in doing so "foregrounded and often reworked cultural and social codes" (1). Although they may close with a happy, or at least conventional, ending, they also hold subversive possibilities, positing unconventional alternatives to the accepted social order. In the light of this assertion, Talairach-Vielmas focuses on how nineteenth-century conceptions and constructions of femininity, and of the female body, are explored, challenged, and (often) reasserted. In these stories different, sometimes conflicting, notions of the ideal woman – domestic, ethereal, natural, plump, consumptive – are tested and reevaluated. The result of such scrutiny, however, is often the erasure of the female body as it is reduced to signs, metaphors and metonymies, as well as reflections, representations and works of art.

<2> The links between changing notions of femininity and the mid-Victorian growth of consumerism receives attention throughout the book. In the 1860s the angel in the house could, and indeed was often encouraged to, venture out into the streets and towards the new shopping experiences open to her. Middle-class women came to be constructed, and to view themselves, as potentially powerful "desiring and consuming objects" (6). At the same time, however, through their desire and their consumption of goods, these women were feeding and conforming to the male capitalist order and, in so doing, risked becoming "merchandise themselves" (6). The initial chapter on Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869) juxtaposes the masculine capitalist realm, which entraps women, with one in which female characters gain power through language and the telling of tales. Yet these tales, which articulate women's own restricted condition, become binding themselves, and the power gained proves limited if not illusory. Talairach-Vielmas brings out the numerous references to markets, shopping, trading, selling and acquiring in this story, and makes revealing connections between, for example, the transformative power of language in fairy tales and in advertising, concluding that "Ingelow's fantasy denounces the mesmerizing words on which commodity culture thrives, making women false promises of freedom" (31).

<3> The second chapter reads George MacDonald's "The Light Princess" (1864) against the background of Victorian medical and psycho-physiological theories of womanhood. In places Talairach-Vielmas' argument is reminiscent of earlier feminist readings of Victorian science and medicine by such critics as Sally Shuttleworth, which highlight the contradictions inherent in social and medical constructions of femininity, especially those that problematically envisaged women as both delicately ethereal (light) and undesirably fleshly, ruled by their biological functions.⁽¹⁾ Such lines of thought are enhanced by references to restrictive female fashions (tight-lacing) and a detailed discussion of how the story plays with Victorian clichés of ideal womanhood; the gravity-defying princess literally embodies the socially desirable trait of "lightness," thus making her a sign of rebellion by changing "the illusory ideal into a burlesque and threatening female character" (41).

<4> The following chapter on Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) builds on the previous ones, which present fairy tales as, despite any subversion and rebellion along the way, exercises in female education. *Mopsa*, it is argued, shapes "female education into a narrative of captivity" (31), whilst "The Light Princess" (in which the princess eventually loses her lightness) is a record of "woman's education into self-abnegation" (47). In the third chapter, Talairach-Vielmas disputes readings of Alice's growing and shrinking body as a sign of "female potency" (55), instead demonstrating how Alice's gradual understanding of how to control her bodily image, largely through what and how much she ingests, is a signal of her learning how to control her desires and to submit to standard feminine codes of behavior.

<5> Chapter 4 looks at Juliana Horatia Ewing's "Amelia and the Dwarfs" (1870), in which the rebellious little girl Amelia finds herself imprisoned, physically punished and forced to perform acts of servitude for the dwarfs. However, although Amelia learns her lessons, she also learns that by performing the role of the perfect little girl she can make herself desirable through the manipulation of her body and behavior, much like the sensation heroines who are discussed in the later chapters. The chapter goes on, however, to explore Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), a fairy tale distinctly lacking in "fantasy" and a bleak portrayal of women's position, which trains "little girls into accepting their lot" (73). Once again, Talairach-Vielmas shows how girls are educated not only in self-restraint, but self-effacement.

<6> In her first chapter on sensation fiction, Talairach-Vielmas foregrounds her underpinning theme of women as at once consumers and commodities with a fascinating and wide-ranging survey of glass, glasshouses (particularly the Crystal Palace), crystal coffins and mirrors in Victorian fact and fiction. The chapter then goes on to offer a reading of Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1867) and the novel's passionate heroine, Kate Chester, an object of male desire who is placed on display, but who is also a "desiring subject" (103) in her own turn. In a discussion of a key scene, the Crystal Palace with its mass of desirable, displayed objects, is shown to be a hub of desire in which men and women vie for the status of desirer, observer, and consumer, but in which female consumers, such as Kate, are still ultimately victims "of the male capitalist order" (109), and risk "being turned into a commodity" (110). The following chapter builds on these issues as Talairach-Vielmas explores how Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853) and M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) "investigate female aestheticization" in the characters of Lady Dedlock and Lady Audley respectively. The mass production of images,

including print technology and photography, inform the reading of Lady Dedlock as a woman whose reproduced image leaves her open to scrutiny and the “policing gaze” (120), whilst Lady Audley’s portrait – observed by two male intruders – triggers her undoing. Women’s bodies are reduced to representations, which may be replicated, commodified and displayed to their detriment.

<7> The final three chapters deal with Wilkie Collins’ *No Name* (1862), *Armadale*, (1864) and *The Law and the Lady* (1875) and lead the reader through a consideration of Victorian fashion and cosmetics, revealing the contradictions and difficulties inherent in Victorian notions of femininity and feminine beauty. The first of these three chapters concerns Magdalen Vanstone, a young woman who (like Amelia in “Amelia and the Dwarfs”) learns how to perform the role of the ideal woman – turning herself into a desired, commodified object – in order to achieve her own desires. The highlight of this chapter, however, is the excellent discussion of the shopaholic Mrs. Wragge who, despite her status as “a grotesque embodiment of the stereotypical Victorian wife” (139), turns her love of advertisements, her endless desire for new clothes and female accoutrements, into a form of escapism, and an exercising of choice. Her unwieldy body becomes an unconscious sign of rebellion which will not conform to ideal feminine stereotypes.

<8> The final two chapters focus primarily on the use, and abuse, of cosmetics. Both *Armadale*’s Mrs Milroy, and *The Law and the Lady*’s Sara Macallan are women who go to desperate and unsuccessful lengths to achieve ideal beauty. Contrastingly, the character of Miss Gwilt is, shockingly, the image of ideal beauty despite her immoral past and murderous intentions. Like Magdalen, Miss Gwilt aims to achieve her desires through an apparent adherence to the accepted codes of femininity, which associated external beauty with internal purity, but this ultimately makes her “a mere puppet in the hands of the patriarchy” (157). Similarly, *The Law and the Lady*’s Valeria Brinton, searching for the truth about the death of her husband’s first wife, dresses and makes herself up as a strategy for gaining the key to the room that contains the secret of her husband’s past (164). This quest, as Talairach-Vielmas convincingly shows, becomes in many ways a quest for “the secret of femininity, the mystery of woman’s condition in mid-nineteenth-century England” (163). The secret is not a heartening one, as women are revealed to be subject to (and to subject themselves to) masculine assumptions about ideal female aestheticization. Placing these novels against popular scandalous crimes such as the trial for murder of Madeleine Smith, and Rachel Leverson’s quack cosmetics practice, Talairach-Vielmas produces a full, nuanced reading of Victorian conceptions of, and anxieties about, female beauty both natural and artificially enhanced.

<9> This book is well-grounded in classic feminist theory (Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* [1979] is a staple point of reference throughout), but its focus on a number of non-canonical texts ensures that it is both original and informative. As the book brings together such a diverse range of historical and literary interests, it seems likely that few readers will be familiar with all the stories and novels covered by the author. Although the often-complicated plots of the sensation novels are helpfully clarified for the reader, the same is not always true of the earlier chapters on fairy tales and fantasy. Also, a more detailed exploration of how fairy tales and sensation fiction reflect or contradict each other would have been welcome: references to the danger, allure, or coveting of the “natural” woman, for example, are discussed in several

chapters, but not really collated at any point. Nevertheless, there is plenty of thorough and enlightening work here, and *Moulding the Female Body* will be constructive reading for a broad section of Victorian scholars whose interests lie in feminist theory and gender studies, folklore and fairytales, sensation fiction, the history of consumerism and commodity culture.

Endnotes

(1) See for example, Sally Shuttleworth, "Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era," in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (London: Routledge, 1992): 31-51. (^)