

**Networking Angels**

*Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture*. Jill Rappoport. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. 272 pp.

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*“She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it.”* Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women” (1931)

<1>Who of us who cares much to know about Victorian gender relations has not been horrified by the open-handed angel of the house? Ever ready to place someone else’s comforts before her own, vigilant to the needs and concerns of others, she is, as Virginia Woolf tells it, the ideal of womanhood that shuts down the possibilities of truth-telling for the female author, insisting that only flattery and appeasement spill from the female pen. Sitting in drafty corners and eating the dark meat, she was not built for survival; the giving Victorian woman was an agent only in her own suffering.

<2>But Jill Rappoport takes a second look at this lady bountiful and reminds us that gifts can never be taken at face value. The woman who could arrange a room so that she bestowed the comfortable seat on another, or who could serve a dinner so that she might present a guest with the best cut of meat, was a woman both able to act and able to create obligations through her actions. Rappoport’s *Giving Women* might be thought of as a series of studies about what happened after the model Victorian woman gave what she had to give. What happened, Rappoport reveals, was that communities were formed. Alliances were strengthened. Networks through which women could act were enlarged.

<3>Teasing out the implications of women’s gift-exchanges in fiction and poetry, and in philanthropy and activism, and even in reading practices, Rappoport’s study offers both a pleasingly rich account of middle-class women’s culture in the nineteenth-century and a nuanced challenge to the idea that a Victorian woman’s generosity was a dangerous capitulation to misogynist gender norms. As Rappoport demonstrates, in a wide range of texts and

circumstances throughout the nineteenth century, women gave in order to form communities, and those communities, in turn, gave them back an enhanced sense of agency and importance.

<4>Rappoport's analysis, then, is firmly grounded in Marcel Mauss's well-known claim that all gifts are essentially reciprocal trades, binding those who receive them in a network of obligations toward the givers. For women, of course, this could be very bad; Rappoport is quick to point out that Jane Eyre is no fool to reject the jewels Rochester wants to lavish on her. But for some women, a gift's power to create ties of obligation could also be very good, and these are the women who receive the most attention in Rappoport's thorough and engaging work. Barred for the most part from the world of buying and selling, willing and inheriting, Victorian women prove extraordinarily resourceful at inserting themselves into alliances and even at creating new alliances with gifts that require reciprocation from those to whom they are given. Female readers circulated literary annuals as gifts that required re-gifting, so that the bounty might be shared and their own membership in a sentimental reading circle secured. Jane Eyre gifts her cousins, the Rivers, with equal portions of her surprise inheritance, purchasing for herself a community of equals. And the small town of Cranford circulates objects and secrets as a way to mark out who belongs to the community and who is beyond its ken.

<5>In the second half of her book, Rappoport turns her attention to how women's strategies of giving structured not just plots in Victorian narrative, but, as the century progresses, actual ways of giving in charitable, social, and political organizations. Focusing on the women who worked for the Salvation Army, those who campaigned for eugenic reform, and the militantly suffragist Women's Social and Political Union, Rappoport argues that historical women involved in each structure deployed a strategy of highly visible sacrifice in order to elicit a sense of reciprocal obligation from a larger public whose attention, resources, and political power they hoped to win.

<6>Rappoport's accounts of women's communities formed through the exchange of gifts are far from utopian. She notes that women's alliances formed most securely among women of equal social standing, and that philanthropic schemes of giving often created bonds among philanthropists while doing little to bring about cross-class intimacies. Gifts might indeed catalyze new relationships among women in roughly similar social categories, Rappoport observes, but they did not remake society. At the same time, Rappoport challenges our assumptions about exactly how women participated in that society. Most of her chapters illustrate the point that the sentimental network of gifts that women created was not one entirely cordoned off from the marketplace. Instead, the world of altruism and economics intermingled for Victorian women, as her reading of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862) makes clear. In that poem, Rappoport suggests, Lizzie is willing to sacrifice herself for Laura, a gift that sustains their sisterly bonds. At the same time, part of what Lizzie brings to the scene of her own self-sacrifice is a canny understanding of how a service economy – somewhere between domesticity and raw commodity exchange – might work.

<7>What makes Rappoport's reading of "Goblin Market" persuasive is what makes many of her chapters persuasive: her eye for the overlooked historical detail. In reading "Goblin Market," Rappoport's alertness to the anachronism of Lizzie's "silver penny" – no longer minted in the 1850s and 1860s – leads her into an exploration of "Maundy money . . . coins minted for and

given to the ‘deserving’ classes of the poor by royalty, as part of a Anglican ceremony on Holy Thursday before Easter” (100). The coin – both mass-produced and yet intended specifically for an act of personal altruism – perfectly encapsulates the sort of hybrid economies in which Rappoport sees women participating. So too do many of the details of her study, from the female Salvation Army workers’ charitable endeavors to inspire more consumer-mindedness when they visited the homes of the poor, to the sale of suffragette souvenirs which allowed supporters to purchase objects commemorating suffragette imprisonments and even force-feedings; one might use the impersonal medium of the marketplace to buy vicarious participation in female bodily sacrifice.

<8>Rappoport’s engagement with philanthropy and activism in the second part of her book clears out space for more comparative studies of gift economies created by men. Her chapter on the practices of female members of the Salvation Army invites the question of how one distinguishes between charitable practices specifically informed by feminine gift-giving and those that take their cue from a larger, less gender-specific culture of philanthropy. Likewise, her attention to the beatings, arrests, and force-feedings that suffragettes publicized in order to inspire a sense that the public at large owed them something suggests that productive work might be done comparing such crusaders with Irish nationalists or the members of the Indian National Congress who undertook similar tactics in the early twentieth century. Is there a point at which we might understand these tactics as entering a gender-neutral mainstream?

<9>Because of its broad sweep and because of the depth of detail it has to offer about the Victorian community of women, *Giving Women* will join Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women* (2007) as one of the most compelling works on Victorian culture and women in the past decade. Both succeed in rerouting Victorian scholarship away from understanding Victorian feminism as invested solely in individualist models of development. And both are equally effective at dismissing essentialist fantasies of women as naturally communitarian and anti-market. Women gave in order to found and maintain communities, Rappoport argues, and she acknowledges that the practice reveals women to be vigilant about their own self-interest. But of course, a self-interest that leads one to form communities proves that the category of self-interest can never be just about one single self. Rappoport’s study models a sophisticated approach to thinking about self-interest as always embedded in the community at large.