

**Bluebeard Plots, Curious Heroines, and the Realist Novel**

*Curious Subjects: Women and the Trials of Realism*. Hilary M. Schor. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. 271 pp.

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<1>The animating questions of Hilary M. Schor's latest book, *Curious Subjects: Women and the Trials of Realism*, move beyond familiar assumptions about marriage in the realist novel. Rather than accepting marriage as the completion of plot, or an answer to the dominant narrative question, Schor invokes Bluebeard's specter by asking: "*What happens after that first choice?*" Once a woman begins to understand the implications of her choice, how can that woman become free to experiment – to test, to wander, to be curious, to choose again?" (29, italics in original). While the formal requirements of realism put the heroine between "the law of genre" and "the legal constraints of Anglo-American marriage" (6), both propelling her toward a fixed destination, curiosity enters to disrupt and create a space, however small, for choice. Refusing to see the realist novel as the mere embodiment of these laws, Schor asks readers to radically rethink the marriage plot in nineteenth-century novels as instead providing the "*opportunity to pose a question*" (12, italics in original). In this new paradigm, marriage, and most especially the unhappy marriage, becomes an avenue for the development of female subjectivity with attention to political agency as the curious heroine moves between the fixed material world of the realist novel and the world as she sees it. This book makes a bold claim, for Schor argues that it is the realist novel, and more specifically the curious heroine within the realist novel, "that brought the modern feminist subject into being" (2).

<2>Schor's argument is layered, constantly moving between a cultural history of curiosity itself, an analysis of the laws of realism, and a discussion of Anglo-American law and political theory. Within this larger framework, *Curious Subjects* is divided into two parts. The first, "Forming the Novel," provides a broad theorization of the development of the curious heroine alongside the rise of the novel. The second, "Crossing the Threshold," considers judiciously chosen case studies of the curious heroine and her journey toward modern feminist subjectivity within the landscape of realism, a space that Schor argues is "full of interdictions, denials, and surreptitious glances at curiosity" (2).

<3>To situate its central claims, *Curious Subjects* opens with a discussion of the complex cultural history of curiosity, which Schor expansively defines as "a form of inquiry; an innate sense of wonder; a subject unduly interested in looking; an object of true or imagined singularity; and that world of objects cunningly made" (4). In tracing the origins and shifting valences of this

term, Schor yokes together a provocative genealogy that begins with Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, and moves seamlessly through the curious Eve of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Greek story of Pandora, the curio cabinet of the Enlightenment, the epistolary voice of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Charles Perrault's Bluebeard story, and even Angela Carter's twentieth-century revision of that tale, "The Bloody Chamber." This initial meditation brings to the surface the doubleness of curiosity, both "something you have" and "something you are" (4). Focusing on major works by Henry James, including *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-81) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), Schor interrogates the interconnectedness of "realism, contract, and curiosity" (55). Rounding off the first half of the book with an analysis of Lewis Carroll's topsy-turvy *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), which we are asked to take seriously as realist fiction, Schor demonstrates that realism, like curiosity, involves a tricky doubleness. Within the realist novel, she argues, the "curios of the real world" are brought into close proximity with the "curiosity of knowing we are in a fiction" (70).

<4>If the first half of Schor's book addresses the question, "How did the novel come to be the requisite domicile for the curious heroine?" (73), the bulk of the second half examines the curious heroine as she crosses, and occasionally recrosses, thresholds in the works of William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot. To illuminate the specificity of each featured heroine, as well as her role in the journey toward feminist agency, Schor formulates an apt counterpart from Victorian culture. The narration of *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), showcasing the enigmatic heroine Becky Sharp, is likened to an ever-transitioning magic lantern show. The plot of *Bleak House* (1852-53), motivated by Lady Dedlock's curious question "Who copied that?" (136), is compared, in turn, to the "live wire along which information travels endlessly but not always smoothly, jumping from place to place" (134). Curiosity arises in Dickens's novel from the temporal displacement of information, as writing "flies around the novel" in the form of court documents, wills, and various "scraps of paper" (153). The novel's curious heroines, Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson, eventually reunite the two separate strands of Dickens's legal thriller. Importantly, they do this with vastly different fates; Lady Dedlock faces "death by curiosity" (137), whereas Esther Summerson learns to be a master of indirect curiosity and experiences "all the rewards of self-abnegation and modesty" (159).

<5>Schor asserts from the opening of her book that she seeks to connect curiosity in the realist novel with the development of a feminist and not merely female subject, and she accomplishes this in a chapter devoted to analyzing Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) via the political thought of John Stuart Mill. In a fresh argument about the marriage plot in "one of the bleakest postmarriage epics of the Victorian period" (187), Schor convincingly shows that *Hard Times* can be read as a story of "coming to enlightenment" (175) for Louisa Gradgrind Bounderby (a stand in for Mill), rather than a narrative that is predominately engrossed in issues of sexual awakening. It is here that Schor suggests the full implication of her most radical claims about familiar Victorian novels: a bad marriage is nonetheless productive for mid-century heroines because it awakens "novelistic curiosity" (174).

<6>Bad marriages in nineteenth-century realist fiction are potentially useful for society, as well as the curious heroine, because they underscore a need for legal reform. This is particularly evident in Eliot's novels, according to Schor, because this novelist "put her heroines within the

tangle of inheritance law, unable to control their own fortunes” (192). Of equal importance, the curious heroines of *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) are made to pass through “error and unhappiness” in order to achieve full subjectivity and the “passion for justice” (193) that we see in the philosophical writings of Mill. Suffering becomes a ghostly presence within these realist novels, Schor argues, a trace that is waiting to emerge in the form of a husband’s will (the dead hand of the law) or the discarded, grave-of-a-woman’s-life, Lydia Glasher.

<7>In the concluding chapters of *Curious Subjects*, Schor demonstrates that the transformative power of the curious heroine to open up a space within the laws of fiction – both generic and extradiegetic – does not end with the demise of nineteenth-century realism. Instead, they carry on in the modernist works of Virginia Woolf, in works of speculative fiction by Margaret Atwood and Kazuo Ishiguro, and in the postmodern feminism of Donna Haraway. Haraway’s “cyborg heroine” experiences the same curiosity as Dickens’s Esther Summerson when she looks in the broken mirror or Carroll’s Alice when she experiences the fall down a rabbit hole. Similarly, we can see the curious heroine in her twentieth- and twenty-first-century form in Atwood’s dystopian novels and Ishiguro’s posthuman world populated by clones. Through a brilliant spark of connection, Schor leads us to see that the relationship between creator and clone in *Never Let Me Go*, as depicted through a hesitant touch on the cheek, is in essence an updated version of Louisa Boucherby’s experimentation with what it means to be fully human. In so doing, Schor not only reveals an under-recognized aspect of nineteenth-century realism but also opens the door to a new body of literature that might be aligned with an existing body of texts already placed under the moniker “neo-Victorian.”

<8>The book’s subtitle, “Women and the Trials of Realism,” forecasts to readers that law will figure prominently in the overarching argument of the book, and Schor declares early on that the realist novel, as she defines it, “plays a complicated game of knowledge, one caught up in debates over statistics, criminal law, evidence, and testimony, questions that will recur throughout this book, explicitly in some chapters and more covertly in others” (24). While the interdisciplinary expertise that Schor brings to her analysis grounds the argument in well-known legal debates of the time, such as the nuances of nineteenth-century marriage contracts and the problematic nature of coverture, the movement through so many different legal concepts – contract, trial, material evidence to name a few – tends to disperse the argument rather than unify it. Unlike the concept of the curious heroine, which consistently unites all chapters of the book through a running reference to the Bluebeard fairy-tale plot, the invocation of Anglo-American law at times feels uneven.

<9>Toward the end of *Curious Subjects*, Schor poignantly likens the Victorian novel to the curio cabinet that plays so central a role in the history of curiosity: “Fiction is at the end only a made thing, an optical device, a device for feeling – but it is also a curiosity cabinet in the oldest sense, a place where everything that once had meaning can have meaning again, can be cared for, can even be loved” (246). Surely this holds some wisdom. For the curious heroine, as Schor demonstrates, the realist novel is not just magic lantern, live wire, or ghost story; it is simultaneously scene of experimentation, trial venue, and location for self-transformation.

