

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Brecke, Anna J. *Widening the Sphere: Mid-to-Late Victorian Popular Fiction, Gender Representation, and Canonicity*. Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2022. 216 pp.

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<1>The concept of separate spheres is both a useful means of summarising some dominant ideological aspects of the Victorian period, and a frustratingly reductive way of viewing a complex and heterogenous society. Anna J. Brecke asserts that, while scholars have long recognised that the notion of separate spheres is a middle-class ideal that does not reflect lived experience, it continues to have a disproportionate impact on modern-day perceptions of Victorian gender relations. *Widening the Sphere* begins with a consideration of how our conceptions of the Victorian era came to be so reliant on such a patently unrealistic and unachievable ideal. Brecke argues that this is due to the dominance of canonical realist fiction in Victorian studies since prominent critics such as Q.D. and F.R. Leavis and J. Hillis Miller valorised a small group of feted novelists (such as Eliot, Trollope and Hardy) whose work ‘reinforce[d] the dual notions that the novel was primarily a masculine genre, and that women, as depicted in realist work, only entered the public, or economic, sphere when tragic circumstances necessitated it’ (28). Brecke asserts that the ‘absence of women writers and women characters who challenge and subvert traditional thinking about gender roles’ in the canon, and so in the perceptions of modern readers, ‘had a long-lasting effect on how we viewed gender roles and gender relationships’ (xvii). Brecke’s aim is to show that if we move our attention from realism to popular fiction by women, we get a more varied and, ironically, more realistic sense of how women lived and worked in Victorian Britain, and of how those experiences were represented in the literature that the majority of Victorians were reading.

<2>The book takes its evidence and examples from a range of different texts, including fiction, beauty manuals, periodical articles, and advertisements. The six body chapters are organised into pairs that explore related themes, with a broadly chronological arrangement from the beginning to the end of the book. The first four

chapters follow a similar format, beginning with analysis of the advice offered to women in beauty manuals and periodicals followed by examples of similar themes appearing in fiction. The final two chapters are more specifically focused on periodicals and do not discuss any fictional works.

<3>Having set out this critical groundwork, Brecke moves on to offer case studies of popular texts. Each chapter explores the depiction of female characters which deviate from the Angel in the House stereotype (that ideal resident of the domestic sphere), and ways in which the division between private and public is disrupted, or shown to have been spurious all along. Chapter Two focuses on sensation fiction and the character of the ‘pretty horsebreaker’, popularised by Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd* (1862), which replaces the Angel in the House as the most desirable model of femininity in the novel. Alongside *Aurora*, Brecke analyses *Vixen’s* Violet Tempest (Braddon, 1878-79), Ellen Wood’s Charlotte Pain in *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863), and, more briefly, Charles Reade’s Catherine Peyton (*Griffith Gaunt*, 1866). Some pretty horsebreakers are portrayed with more authorial approval than others, but in all cases they are attractive and with their love of horses, dogs, the countryside, and sometimes with more masculine behaviours such as betting and hunting, or the morally dubious label of being ‘fast’, they offer ‘an alternative type of normative femininity in Victorian fiction’ (xxvii). Brecke also shows how, by default, the country manors in which the pretty horsebreaker is to be found, are ‘hybrid’ spaces in which women’s ‘private lives are often lived visibly’ (58), due to the range of personal and professional visitors that enter into the domestic space, and ‘the immense staff required to keep house and estate operating smoothly’ (59).

<4>Chapter Three looks at the setting of the home-shop in New Woman fiction, particularly Eliza Lynn Linton’s *The Rebel of the Family* (1880) and Amy Levy’s *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), which leads to a blending of domestic and business environments for the women who live, work and visit there. Brecke makes the point that the ‘shop-girls, female shopkeepers, women typists and office clerks’ of New Woman fiction are at odds with the Angel in the House figure, which is intimately connected to a ‘middle-class ideal reli[ant] on the ability of the middle-class family to be physically removed from the location of business or industry’ (66). This leads into Chapter Four’s discussion of ‘organized charity work’ which means that ‘women characters enter into the labor force either as fundraisers and organizers [...] or as frontline workers’ (xxix), roles which could lead to social or personal criticism, but also a sense of purpose and freedom as women visited neighbourhoods that they would not have otherwise. Dickens’s famously critical depictions of Mrs Pardiggle and Mrs Jellyby (*Bleak House*, 1853) are compared with the more nuanced

and self-aware characters in Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well* (1867) and *Dear Faustina* (1897), and Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* (1880) who 'weigh the consequences of charity work as it conflicts with societal expectations' (92). This chapter makes an interesting contrast to others, as rather than focusing on how the female domestic sphere is breached or challenged, it considers how women visiting the homes of the poor could be an invasion of a family's private space by a higher-class meddler. This reinforces one of Brecke's overall points: it is not that popular fiction depicts women in public as a good thing, but that popular fiction offers varied examples of women in public with a range of consequences.

<5>The final chapter explores supernatural fiction in which 'the idea of the angel in the house is refuted by female characters whose bodily presence in domestic spaces unravels or destroys those spaces' (xxx). Building her readings on Victorian associations of women's bodies with the home, and theoretical approaches which consider the ways in which identity, bodies and spaces are intertwined, Brecke looks at narratives by Braddon, Broughton, Marie Corelli and Florence Marryat which feature supernatural presences, mesmerism, spiritualism and vampires. In these examples 'Home-space and the female body become uncanny as they are both transformed into unfamiliar locations' (115), and women 'do not create or are not capable of creating [...] home spaces [and so] are disruptive to assumptions about normative femininity' (137).

<6>Throughout, the very narrow Victorian realist canon that Brecke identifies is often conflated with realism as a genre. There is little acknowledgement that the distinctions between realism and popular genres are (much like the distinction between the separate spheres) unstable and largely imaginary, that popular authors often employed realist techniques, and that novels such as *The Romance of a Shop* are often categorized as realist works. Moreover, scholars of canonical realist novelists such as Hardy or Gaskell might question the extent to which the genre is generalised as conservative and lacking in women who enter public spaces with impunity, or otherwise challenge the Angel in the House ideal. Despite this, the readings of popular fiction that arise from Brecke's championing of it over realist fiction are perceptive and achieve her stated goals of widening our understanding of women's sphere in the Victorian era, and of bringing to light a broad and varied representation of female experience in understudied popular Victorian women's novels; in this way the monograph is also a welcome addition to ongoing critical discussions about how we might widen Victorian studies more generally, particularly in relation to the recovery of popular fiction. At the same time, *Widening the Sphere* would make an excellent addition to undergraduate reading lists, it is

clearly structured and cogently argued in a way that makes it accessible for students,[\(1\)](#) and it offers some up-to-date definitions of key terms like the Angel in the House and, of course, separate spheres, which students need to know, but also need to know to be wary of using in a simplistic manner.

### **Notes**

(1)The review copy that I was using had some unfortunate errors which could cause confusion, but hopefully future print runs will correct this. The lack of an index is a shame as the book does the important work of offering readings of several non-canonical authors, and readers may well want to return to particular parts as their own knowledge of Victorian popular fiction expands.