

Reviews

Catherine J. Golden. *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003. 287 pages. ISBN: 0-8130-2679-2. \$ 59.95, hardcover.

Nineteenth-century fiction consists not only of written text, but also of illustrations. This tends to be overlooked, in part, perhaps, because these illustrations are frequently omitted in reprintings of the works. However, as Catherine J. Golden shows in her study *Images of the Woman Reader in British and American Fiction*, illustrations play an important role in the narratives in which they appear.

Golden's study looks at the image of the woman reader in nineteenth-century fiction in both the U.S. and Britain. The study is divided into three sections, a short introductory section, where she provides the social context in which these works appeared and an overview of the contending views regarding women readers of the time, a close reading section, focusing on various representations of women readers and the different roles played by these women in Victorian novels, and a final section which deals with illustrations where women readers figure.

As Golden shows in the first part of her study, the issue of the woman reader was much discussed in both Britain and America in the Victorian era. While reading, on the one hand, was considered a fitting pastime activity for a middle-class woman, as it helped her become more genteel and also educate herself, on the other hand, it was also feared that reading could be a threat to a woman's health and virtue. According to Golden, these views existed alongside each other throughout the nineteenth century and, surprisingly, they remained largely intact, despite the budding women's movement and other changes in the lives of women at this time.

In the second part of her study Golden investigates different images of women readers in Victorian fiction. This is done in part through "transatlantic pairings" (52) where Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) is paired off with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). While Golden should have credit for not limiting herself to one nation in her choice of books, it is never clear to the reader why these four books have been paired off with each other and as she does not deal at all with questions about nation and national identity, her choice of transatlantic pairs seems somewhat redundant. Rather than comparing the novels, Golden presents them as four examples of how women readers are portrayed in Victorian fiction in both the U.S. and Britain.

Golden's selection includes writers from both sides of the Atlantic, including the French writer Gustave Flaubert,¹ but the majority of the novels are British. Also, the novels cover a long time period, ranging from Jane Austen's *Manfield Park* (1814) to

1. Flaubert is the only writer who does not come from an Anglo-American background.

Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894). In other words, Golden covers a lot of ground, both historically and geographically. Even if this large scope is refreshing in that it is not limited by national borders or time periods, it also becomes a weakness in the study as Golden does little to problematize it. Why have these particular novels been selected? How come there are no American novels from the first half of the century (especially since Golden refers to Cathy Davidson's study of American novels up until 1820)?² Are there no differences in how female readers are portrayed in Britain compared to America? If there are no differences, why is that? Given the patriotic slant coloring attitudes to women's reading and education in the U.S. at the time, this seems a highly pertinent question. Another issue that could have been investigated in connection to questions concerning nation is the medical arguments used against women's reading at the time. As Golden mentions, extensive reading was considered a threat to women's morality and reproductive health. However, in the U.S. this threat to women's health was also seen as a threat to the nation as a whole, since the health and virtue of women (and also men) were intimately tied to those of the nation.³ By omitting issues of nation and national identity Golden leaves unanswered questions that her transatlantic approach seems to encourage.

The third, and in my view strongest, section of Golden's study deals with an often overlooked aspect of the nineteenth-century novel, its illustrations. Golden identifies four types of women readers that recur in nineteenth-century fiction, both in the narratives and their illustrations. The first type, the social reader, is defined not so much by what she reads as by her actions for others. The social reader is often portrayed reading out loud in the family circle, and she illustrates the responsibility Victorian women had for the rearing and education of their children (156). Here we find Marmee, the mother in Alcott's *Little Women*, for example. Conforming to the Victorian feminine ideal of the Angel in the House, the interrupted reader puts aside her book to attend to her children or to social responsibilities. In this case, the book functions as a symbol of gentility and, like the social reader, the interrupted reader is defined by her actions rather than her choice of reading material (141). Alice Wickfield in Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) is an interrupted reader. As opposed to the idealized social and interrupted readers, the antiquated reader is a caricature. This type of reader is related to derisive portrayals of intellectual women and she is frequently a spinster and/or an eccentric. Golden mentions Widow Douglas in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) as a representative for this type of reader. The isolated reader is the most subversive type among the four. As opposed to the others, all of whom are presented as readers in a social context, whether it be in the form of teaching religion to bored boys or holding a book as an elegant prop, the isolated reader reads alone. Thus, the isolated reader is not defined by what she does for others, but by what she reads. Reading alone, immersed in her book, the isolated

2. Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

3. See for example, Amariah Brigham, *Remarks on the Influence of Mental Cultivation and Mental Excitement upon Health* (1832; Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845).

reader is often perceived as a threat as she blatantly defies Victorian feminine ideals, where selflessness and care for others are central. Jo March in *Little Women* is sometimes cast as an isolated reader. Golden convincingly argues that these “four pictorial types are reliable indicators of ideologies that govern women’s reading practices. As visual formulas, they inscribe cultural attitudes and, in some cases, manage our perception of women’s reading as a socially sanctioned subversive act” (140). Furthermore, she shows that these visual images of women readers interact with the written narrative in which they appear.

For a scholar interested in questions concerning nationhood and national identity, Golden’s study is at times frustrating as it does not deal with these questions despite its transatlantic approach. However, Golden’s book still has many strong points. The primary contribution that this study makes is to draw attention to an often overlooked aspect of nineteenth-century fiction. While we today consider illustrations to belong strictly in children’s books, in the 1800s they were an important part of the narrative. Golden’s study exposes a field of exploration which can give us new insights into the fascinating world of nineteenth-century fiction.

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Helle Porsdam, ed. *Coming to a Theater Near You: Det moderne USA set gennem film*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2005. 247 pages. ISBN 87-7674-047-1.

As will be apparent from the title, this volume of essays combines an American and a Danish context in a way that is unusual in our academic studies. It focuses throughout on American film, but since the language of choice is Danish, the book’s intended audience must necessarily be a national rather than an international one. The essays are also conceived and written in such a way as to make them accessible to ordinary people with an interest in modern American films, but without any scholarly background in American Studies. In my opinion, this volume should be extremely valuable to secondary school and university teachers and students of American Civilization, and not just in courses on popular culture. The extent to which the Danish text will be perceived as a problem by students in the other Scandinavian countries, is hard for me to say, but in comparison to the extraordinary challenges posed by spoken Danish, the difficulties involved here ought to be surmountable by anyone with a serious interest in the subject.

In addition to the editor’s judicious and succinct introduction, the volume consists of 17 essays on a wide variety of topics involving American film as expressions of various aspects of American culture. The great majority of contributors are Danish academics from Syddansk Universitet in Odense, who with this book continue to impress this reader as a powerhouse of American Studies in Scandinavia. *Coming to a Theater Near You* is structured in five chapters of three or four essays each, each dealing with a particular aspect of the book’s subject. The first chapter focuses on American identity, using *Dead Man*, *Gangs of New York*, and *The Godfather* (especially Parts I and II) to make its points. The subject of Chapter II is religious belief