

*Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity In Victorian And Edwardian Women's Autobiographies*, by Mary Jean Corbett. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. 240 pp. ISBN 0-19-506858-0; \$36.00.

In a theoretical climate which questions the very genre of autobiography as a legitimate category of analysis, Mary Jean Corbett offers a powerful argument against such a claim. Her book belongs with recent studies by Sidonie Smith, Peggy Kamuf and volumes edited by Shari Benstock and the team of Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. Each of these texts attempts in some way to theorize a place for women's autobiographies by challenging the extreme position of the "defacement" of the autobiographical subject articulated by poststructuralist Paul de Man (which, as Corbett points out, "makes very little sense to those of us whose histories have always been effaced" [6]), and by disputing humanist/patriarchal definitions of autobiography which privilege a unique self. Aside from the masculine coded "unique self," this definition implies access to a public sphere which excludes any possibility for the existence of women's autobiographies, since women traditionally were, with few exceptions, relegated to spaces associated with the private and domestic.

By discarding the humanist categories of what constitutes autobiography and by looking into the margins of nineteenth-century Victorian and Edwardian histories, where the body of the voices/texts of the subjects of Corbett's study reside, she effectively reclaims women's autobiographies. The greatest strength of Corbett's book is the sheer variety of texts from which she draws her arguments. She includes autobiographical writings from more familiar writers, such as Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but also draws upon texts by spiritual autobiogra-

phers, such as Mary Martha Sherwood and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, and accounts by Victorian actresses Madge Kendal, Marie Bancroft, and Fanny Kemble. Chapters are also devoted to representations of late Victorian actress "personalities," Ellen Terry, Stella Campbell, and Irene Vanbrugh, and to histories of Edwardian suffragettes including Constance Lytton.

While it may surprise some readers that Corbett begins her discussion of these women's texts by devoting a chapter to what she calls "two exemplars from the masculine canon of nineteenth-century autobiography," William Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, her analysis develops a common thread among the various sections of the book. She reveals that it is her intention "to disabuse [herself] and others of the notion that, for men, autobiography is a relatively unproblematic genre" (10). Carlyle's text exemplifies this difficulty as Linda Peterson argues in *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (31-32):

Most critics who call *Sartor Resartus* an autobiography mean, in fact, not the whole work but Book Second. . . Yet even if we evade the generic question of the entire work, limit ourselves to the second book, treat it as the autobiography of an imaginary German philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, and then later equate Teufelsdröckh with Carlyle, the work still resists the label "autobiography".

Corbett chooses not to discuss *Sartor Resartus* in terms of its curious relation to a particular definition of autobiography. She concentrates instead on what cultural and social conditions produced the climate for its publication, arguing, in part, that Carlyle's relationship to the professional sphere engaged a "dialectic between genius and hack," because the text was originally published in *Fraser's Magazine*. On different terms, Wordsworth and Carlyle both negotiated their

way through the dilemma of legitimating themselves as writers in the marketplace by appropriating emergent middle-class values such as professional respectability. Paradoxically, they approached these new standards from opposite ends of the social spectrum: Wordsworth from the protected enclave of the gentlemanly class and Carlyle from the doubly difficult position of being Scottish by birth and the son of a stonemason.

Corbett examines Victorian and Edwardian women's autobiographies in relation not only to the professional sphere of Wordsworth and Carlyle, but to the private sphere of spiritual autobiographers. In this chapter, Corbett problematizes what many scholars perceive as entirely separate arenas, by arguing that spiritual autobiographers appropriate the private as a venue for public representation. Corbett cites Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna as such an example. In her *Personal Recollections* (76), Tonna exclaims:

The literary labour that I pursued for my own sustenance was perfect luxury, so long as my humble productions were made available for the spiritual good of the people so dear to me. My little books and tracts became popular, because, after some struggle against a plan so humbling to literary pride, I was able to adopt the suggestion of a wise Christian brother, and form a style of such homely simplicity that if, on reading a manuscript to a child of five years old, I found there was a single sentence or word above his comprehension, it was instantly corrected to suit that lowly standard.

Under the auspices of a "higher authority" and by presenting interior spaces as a sanctuary from the outside world, Corbett argues that writers such as Tonna were able to represent themselves in the public sphere.

Corbett's final chapter, devoted to Edwardian suffragette autobiographies and the social and political motivations surrounding the movement, is perhaps the

richest in the book. By juxtaposing passages of these texts with historical information and each writer's personal experience, she constructs these autobiographies as conflicted between the collective and the individual and the private and the public (179). Corbett describes "the Cause" as "intersubjective." The aristocratic Constance Lytton exemplifies suffragette intersubjectivity when she disguises herself as a working class woman so that she can report from first hand experience the dangerous and inhumane practice of forcible feedings of imprisoned activists. By adopting the identity of "Jane Warton," Lytton was able to expose the discrepancies in treatment of suffragettes from the upper classes as opposed to the often violent conduct of prison officials towards women activists of the working class. While Lytton believed in her endeavor as essential to "the Cause," Corbett also recounts the resistance by dissidents within the movement who claimed that "[suffragette] leaders exploited willing women by subjecting them to violence at the hands of government, and then capitalized on their victimization for publicity's sake" (170). Women such as Cicely Hamilton characterized one meeting as "brutal and crazed" where the suffragettes "had resigned their responsible individuality" (174). By bringing these dissenting voices out, Corbett draws attention to the positionality of suffragette autobiographies and calls a monolithic meaning of the suffrage movement into question (178).

Corbett's close examination of neglected texts fortifies her arguments. Herein lies the strength of the book; she urges readers to look further, to analyze more of these myriad voices. Corbett's book challenges scholars from all disciplines to look into the full range of feminine discourses and to redefine the categories of analysis.

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