

1-1-2006

Review [of *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire, and the Constraints of Culture* by Beth Torgerson]

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eth-century performance theory and Victorian scholarship [...] confirm[ing] the standard view of Victorian England as zealously anti-theatrical" (205). Finally, Voskuil analyses the way in which the actress Ellen Terry has been misrepresented by two figures from the Modernist theatrical era: her son, Edward Gordon Craig, and her friend, George Bernard Shaw. By exploring Terry's concept of natural acting through her own writings, Voskuil shows how both Craig and Shaw "downplayed Terry's theatricality" (219) in order to fit her into their own agendas.

Lynn. M. Voskuil's *Acting Naturally* is a rich and compelling study of Victorian theatricality and authenticity that is particularly adept at teasing out the ambiguities inherent in those concepts. With its re-examination of the concept of Victorian theatricality alongside the work of nineteenth century performance theorists, such as Hazlitt and Lewes, Voskuil's book proves there is a lot more to be said than that the nineteenth century was "anti-theatrical." In short, *Acting Naturally* is indispensable to anybody with an interest in Victorian theatre, performance theory and/or cultural history.

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Beth Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire, and the Constraints of Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 192 pp. \$65.00.

Reading the Brontë Body is a clearly written, well organized book that joins a growing list of titles dedicated to excavating the buried body in the canonical Brontë novels. Similar work is being done on Jane Austen's works by Jill Heyt-Stevenson and others, while the gothic as a genre has been focused on the body (in pain and otherwise) for the past decade. Most of these studies use or are informed by the theories of Michel Foucault, and Torgerson's book is no exception. In her Introduction, she states that she will examine "how illness provides them [Anne, Emily, and Charlotte] with unique ways to critique gender and class constraints inherent in Victorian culture" (3). Claiming that she will use the fields of "medical anthropology and the history of medicine" as her theoretical lenses, Torgerson asserts that "illness is also socially constructed" (3) and, as such, informs its representations in the Brontë novels.

But this is where the trouble begins. What is illness? Is it in the tissues of the body or in the brain's imaginings? Torgerson attempts to define illness in her Introduction, but pretty quickly we realize we are on a slippery slope: "illnesses need to be understood within their cultural

contexts to ensure a full appreciation of each illness's significance [. . .] the body carries wounds, the signs of conflict, when there are discrepancies between what the self desires and what the culture allows" (5). By moving between a discussion of physical diseases (i.e., cholera) and psychological illnesses (alcoholism, anorexia, depression) as if they could be understood and discussed as equivalent, Torgerson has produced a fairly mixed bag of analysis.

Chapter One, "'Sick of Mankind and Their Disgusting Ways': Victorian Alcoholism, Social Reform, and Anne Brontë's Narratives of Illness," provides a microcosm for the definitional problems in this book. I think this may be because alcoholism clearly "infects" so many male characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and therefore it could have been concretely addressed as an addictive illness. Instead, Torgerson insists on treating it as a social problem that allows Anne to explore gender and class issues. Torgerson focuses on both *Agnes Grey* and *Tenant* as texts of social reform in which the author "explores the interrelationships between power, abuse, and illness" (22). Being an alcoholic causes a man to be abusive to his wife and family, while wives and mothers of alcoholics were routinely blamed during the Victorian period for not preventing the sickness through their angelic ministrations. For a Victorian like Anne Brontë, however, the only escape from this vicious cycle of shame and blame could be found in repentance and a return to a strong relationship to a loving God. But if one can pray away an illness, one cannot be suffering from a physically based sickness. In short, alcoholism was not understood by the Victorians as an "illness," and Torgerson tends to follow suit.

Chapter Two, "Ailing Women in the Age of Cholera: Illness in *Shirley*," ostensibly examines cholera as the "displaced" subject of the novel, "with women's health as the focus of Brontë's concern" (39). But again, pretty quickly the "plague" being analyzed is not cholera, but the stultifying effects of limited opportunities for women on their health and well-being. In fact, as Torgerson herself admits, *Shirley* cannot be concerned with cholera because the disease was not known in Europe until 1831 and the novel is set in 1811 (41). This does not mean, however, that Brontë was not well aware of the threat of cholera, as her frequent allusions to "foul east winds" and "pure west winds" were a recognition of the fact that cholera had spread from India through Russia and eventually reached England in 1848 (42). But the illnesses that Torgerson actually explores in *Shirley* are "social constructs, subject to change given necessary social reform" (44). Again, Caroline's depression and hypochondria magically disappear when she marries, while the rabies that Shirley herself contracts is cured when she cauterizes the bite with an iron (as Emily had done before her).

Chapter Three, "Hysteria, Female Desire, and Self-Control in *Villette*," veers even more clearly into the disease as metaphor territory with

an analysis of how “the bodies of the four leading characters can be seen as battlegrounds on which the ideological wars scar and deplete the wholeness of the individual” (59). Focusing on the two breakdowns that Lucy Snowe has while working for Mme. Beck, this chapter reads illness as a “cultural constraint that has the power to shape her life” (63). The chapter goes on to examine the ideological battle between Catholic and Protestant faiths for control of Lucy’s mind, while also touching on “self-control as an indicator of mental health” and “the interconnection between self-control and hysteria” (64). Attempting to mediate the conflicts inherent in radically opposed ideologies produces hysteria in Lucy, but once again the hysteria resolves itself when Lucy inherits her own school from the largesse of M. Paul and lives on his letters (the *logos*) for the rest of her life. Such a resolution of her condition places Lucy squarely in the illness as metaphor category, and as such, undercuts the material basis of the argument that was made in the Introduction.

The last chapter, “Vampires, Ghosts, and the Disease of Dis/Possession in *Wuthering Heights*,” treats Catherine as a ghost and Heathcliff as a vampire, both of them dispossessed by the disease of patriarchy: “In *Wuthering Heights*, illness becomes a dominant metaphor for the flaws within a land-based patriarchy since Brontë views the patriarchy as a system where power perpetuates itself no matter what, preying upon the life-energies of those caught within the system” (94). Brontë uses illness throughout the novel as a metaphor to “signify the power of culture to create such extreme self-alienation that once illness is present, it—often literally, always figuratively—means the kiss of death” (95). But note how that qualifying phrase, “often literally, always figuratively,” sums up the problems with this approach. The argument is easier to make if one treats illness as a literary trope, a metaphor for all the “ills of society,” particularly its treatment of women. The argument is much harder to make if one actually were to do the research that it would take to ascertain exactly what the Brontës knew about cholera, what their readings were in their father’s medical books, and what their understandings were of their mother’s and sisters’ early deaths. It is certainly not new to recognize ghostly or vampiric aspects in Catherine and Heathcliff, but neither condition is a “disease” or “illness” in any way that we or the Victorians would have recognized.

In the final analysis, there is simply not enough research in Victorian medical sources to make this book deliver what it promises in its title or Introduction. Part of the problem is this tendency to veer into treating illness as a metaphor for class and gender issues. We have had dozens of analyses of these themes in the Brontë novels, and I am afraid that at many points this book sounds all too much like those. Although I think this work has little in it to be useful to the Brontë specialist, it is tightly organized and clearly written. *Reading the Brontë Body* could usefully be

used by undergraduates working on their own research projects on the novels.

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Sophia Andres. *The Preraphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 288pp. \$89.95 (hb), \$29.95 (pb), \$9.95 (CD)

The strikingly original premise of this study focusing on novels by Gaskell, Collins, Eliot and Hardy is that novelistic realism in the later Victorian period can be understood as continuous with Victorian visual culture more generally. Starting from Braddon's well-known description, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, of the eponymous central character's Pre-Raphaelite portrait, Andres explores the central role which Pre-Raphaelite art played in the mid-Victorian debate about realism, noting that Eliot's well-known reference to the minuteness of Dutch art in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* might well have been understood by a contemporary reader as alluding to the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and that Eliot reviewed the third volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, a significant conjunction given that Ruskin's defences of Pre-Raphaelitism would have strongly associated him with the movement at that time.

Andres identifies the appeal of Pre-Raphaelite art to the Victorian novelist as lying in the combination of naturalism and "symbolic and psychological realism" (17) which Ruskin famously identified in the hallucinatory vividness of Hunt's picture *The Awakening Conscience*, and argues that a major focus of critical controversy around the perceived "ugliness" (20) and lack of nobility in Pre-Raphaelite realism lay in its subversion of conventional Victorian gender stereotypes, with Millais's *The Order of Release*, for example, with its depiction of a man "seeking protection and solace in a woman" (21), attracting the comment that "I would rather remain in prison all my life, or even be hanged, than go out of prison to live with that woman" (21). Andres suggests that this problematizing of gender ideals is particularly apparent in the curious indeterminacy of Pre-Raphaelite representations of "fallen" women, exemplified in the way the central figure of *The Awakening Conscience* is portrayed as towering over her lover, "whose reclining pose in relation to her stance, as well as to her epiphany, registers him as a 'fallen man'" (38). Andres draws attention to the permissive way in which the relationship between text and image was conceived among the Pre-Raphaelites, which allowed the artist, in Rossetti's words to "allegorize

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