

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 17.2 (Summer 2021)

Cameron, S. Brooke. [*Critical Alliances: Economics and Feminist English Women's Writing, 1880-1914*](#). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 312 pp.

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<1>S. Brooke Cameron's *Critical Alliances: Economics and Feminist English Women's Writing, 1880-1914* is a thoughtful addition to the rich field of Victorian studies that considers the entanglement of gender and economics, building on works such as Deanna Kreisel's *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (University of Toronto Press 2012), Lise Sanders's *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880-1920* (Ohio State University Press 2006), and Jill Rappoport's *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (Oxford University Press 2012). Focusing on literature written during the turn-of-the-century expansion of women's employment opportunities, *Critical Alliances* "surveys women's participation in varying economic coalitions — from kinship, to professional bonds, or the intellectual labour union — in an attempt to rewrite gender and, with it, women's access to the modern economics of work and pleasure" (20). Cameron draws upon a vast range of fin-de-siècle discourses—degeneration and eugenics; emigration and Irish nationalism; cosmopolitanism and flâneurie; art criticism; Victorian marriage reform and legal debates around the "Deceased Wife's Sister Bill"—treating literary texts as "just one of many social narratives...through which identity categories are reproduced and/or negotiated" (8-9). The through line that connects Cameron's diverse objects of study is their shared commitment to challenging Victorian domestic ideology and carving out new spaces for women in the marketplace. Most compellingly, she places female collaboration at the center of this challenge. Cameron argues that "critical alliances" between women, both within and across texts, enable authors to "collectively rewrite the symbolic plots limiting the terms of feminine embodiment and economy agency" (12).

<2>Chapter One focuses on Olive Schreiner's writing to highlight how traditional female education limited the fin-de-siècle New Woman's access to the modern workforce. Beginning with Schreiner's 1883 novel *The Story of an African Farm* and then moving to her nonfiction polemic *Woman and Labor* (1911), Cameron illustrates Schreiner's argument that women's education was "in need of immediate reforms so that women might keep pace with, and become satisfied contributors to, the fin-de-siècle workforce" (36). She productively situates this argument within late Victorian discourse around degeneration and eugenics. While biological determinists like Herbert Spencer feared that women's engagement in advanced education would damage their reproductive potential and lead to the degeneration of the race, Schreiner (as well as her contemporary Sarah Grand) suggests that women's "intellectual cultivation," facilitated by middle-class feminist collectives, would instead enhance their "work as childbearers and

caregivers” (55). While this argument seeks to free middle-class women from the “eugenic logic of compulsory motherhood,” Cameron acknowledges that it has little to offer working-class women (60). Schreiner thus “reverses the class dynamics of domestic ideology,” sending middle-class women out of the house to seek professions while limiting working-class women to their domestic and reproductive roles (60). Cameron’s analysis here also brings out the political ambiguity of white middle-class Victorian feminisms: rather than fitting into a teleological model of progress that moves unidirectionally toward enlightened inclusion, feminist interventions such as Schreiner’s premise middle-class women’s inclusion upon the continued exclusion of working-class women, women of color, and other marginalized groups.

<3>Chapters Two and Three turn to Amy Levy and George Egerton, making complementary arguments for the power of female bonds to enable “women’s fluid movement between the domestic sphere and the public sphere of employment and business” (71). Chapter Two focuses on how sisterly bonds support women’s professional goals outside of the home in Levy’s *The Romance of a Shop* (1888). Cameron skillfully situates her reading of the novel at the heart of a “clash between consanguineal and conjugal plots,” (74) arguing that sororal bonds “pave the way for a new marriage plot that does not preclude women’s sexual and economic agency” (88). Chapter Three shifts to the urban marketplace, focusing on Mary Desmond’s emigration from Ireland to New York City and subsequent struggle to assert her place in the urban cityscape and labor market in George Egerton’s *The Wheel of God* (1898). Drawing on the abundant scholarly conversation surrounding Victorian women in the city, Cameron argues that feminist alliances with other professional women underwrite Mary’s ability to navigate the city and “negotiate the modern gendered marketplace” (105). While these texts stake important claims for women’s access to both the workplace and the city, their critique of the capitalist marketplace does largely remain limited to women’s exclusion from it. They are all, as Cameron states, working “through—not for—the means of production” (126). Though Cameron briefly mentions various authors’ brushes with socialism and labor organizing — Schreiner’s friendships with Karl Pearson and Edward Carpenter, Levy’s connection to writer and trade unionist Clementina Black— she does not engage at length with Marxism literary criticism or a larger discourse of class critique. While such discussion may exceed the scope of her project, I was eager to see more fully elaborated what I found one of her most interesting lines of inquiry: the story of how fin-de-siècle capitalism adapted to preserve an existing economic hierarchy even as middle-class women’s increased participation in work outside of the home threatened traditional demarcations of class.

<4>The last two chapters of the book shift to an aesthetic marketplace, focusing on women’s engagement in artistic production, consumption, and connoisseurship. Chapter Four reads Michael Field’s ekphrastic poetry in *Sight and Song* as a reclamation of the flâneur’s masculine gaze that threatened to objectify Levy’s Lorimer sisters and Egerton’s Mary Desmond as they navigated urban spaces. In nuanced close readings of Fields’s “synaesthetic” poems, Cameron argues that Field recasts the relationship between artist and muse as an “ethical lesbian erotics” that breaks down the binary between subjective experience and objective observation (156). In previous chapters, the “productive agency of collaboration” allowed women access to the urban marketplace; here, it enables a “non-objectifying” form of aesthetic consumption (166). Chapter Five turns to Virginia Woolf, a writer who famously claimed “women’s economic independence” as the necessary foundation of women’s literary production and the critique of

domestic ideology that such work enables. Reading *The Years* and *Three Guineas* with close attention to “intergeneration dialogue” (173), Cameron sees in Woolf’s relationship with her Victorian predecessors a “new model of feminist inheritance that is grounded in dialogic resistance and cultural (re)construction of gender roles” (205). The non-homogenizing collective of the “female pressure group” in *Three Guineas* ultimately parallels Woolf’s intertextual “critical alliances” across a multi-generational history of feminist writing.

<5>Because Cameron seeks to “highlight the range among representations of fin-de-siècle feminist bonds” (27), this is not a book that can be condensed into a single takeaway. Indeed, she sets out to demonstrate that there exists “no single model or ‘grand narrative’ of feminist cooperation at the fin de siècle; rather, representations of women’s alliances vary in direct accord with the specific site, and intended outcome, of strategic intervention into the gendered marketplace” (26). Cameron’s readings of these authors’ diverse, situated interventions contribute to an ongoing scholarly conversation around gendered economics in the Victorian period. Because of its archival richness — each chapter situates its primary text within not only Victorian studies but also a range of related literary works, historical developments, and cultural debates — this book will also be of particular value to students and scholars seeking to gain a broad entrée into the larger discourse surrounding women’s work at the fin de siècle. Expansively researched and wide-ranging in scope, the book makes a compelling case that “feminist cooperation was — and continues to be — integral to women’s participation in the modern workforce” (204).