

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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**Hughes, Linda.** *Victorian Women Writers and the Other Germany: Cross-Cultural Freedoms and Female Opportunity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 275 pp.

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<1>“Why did so many British women travel to Germany and live there for months or years?” (xiii). This clever question motivates Linda Hughes’s elegant study of ten nineteenth-century women writers. Although the exact nature of their relationship to Germany varied, Hughes argues that the country offered them personal freedom, intellectual stimulation, and artistic inspiration. To varying degrees, these women experienced what Hughes, drawing from anthropologist Mércio Pereira Gomes, calls “ethnoexocentrism,” an acceptance of and participation in another culture that entails both reflection on that culture and on one’s own. For Hughes, ethnoexocentrism is akin to a concept that may be more familiar in literary studies: cosmopolitanism, particularly Kwame Anthony Appiah’s notion of a “rooted cosmopolitanism” in which the individual retains a connection to their home culture while remaining open to other places.

<2>In part, then, Germany was important to these women as a country other than Britain, a place that allowed them to see themselves and their home culture “through the lens of another society and language” (3). But there were also specific aspects of nineteenth-century Germany that drew them. Most significantly, in Germany women had greater personal freedom than they did in Britain. Women were allowed to circulate in public without a male escort, they enjoyed greater intellectual equality, and divorce was permitted in Protestant communities. German art, including visual arts and music but most importantly literature, was deeply resonant for these writers.

<3>Hughes’s study begins with Anna Jameson (1794–1860), who arrived in Germany in 1833. In Weimar, Jameson met Otilie von Goethe, and the two swiftly formed a close and long-lasting friendship. Goethe, the daughter-in-law of Johann von Goethe, was the center of a literary circle which presented Jameson with cultural

alternatives. Among these were nonheteronormative relationships, particularly passionate friendships among women—which came to include Jameson’s love for Goethe. In various ways this relationship, Hughes argues, productively took Jameson “beyond the limits of her own culture’s ideology and gender norms” (28). Jameson’s German experiences shaped her writing, and Hughes considers the centrality of Germany to the books Jameson published between 1834 and 1840. Germany and German culture were among Jameson’s subjects, through which she presented Englishwomen with cultural alternatives; moreover, her experiences also shaped her conception of the female critic, which aligns with her notion of women as natural cosmopolitans.

<4>Jameson’s personal connections in Germany opened up opportunities for other women writers, and Hughes turns next to three who benefited from her trailblazing: Mary Howitt (1799–1888), her daughter Anna Mary Howitt (1799–1888) and Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865). A letter from Jameson introduced the Howitts to German circles, and they in turn introduced Gaskell. The three women’s experiences in Germany in the 1840s and 1850s informed their writing, generating fiction that thematizes cultural difference and ethnoexocentrism, and that in addition pushes boundaries of gender. For instance, Gaskell wrote two short stories set in Germany: “The Gray Woman” (1861) and “Six Weeks at Heppenheim” (1862). Both were shaped by Gaskell’s trip to Heidelberg in 1858, which she took in part to help her daughter Meta recover from a broken engagement. The stories thematize maternal care and cross-cultural encounters, though “Six Weeks” represents the latter favorably while “Gray Woman” is more ambivalent. Hughes also points out that characters in each story take on qualities associated with the opposite gender, suggesting that Gaskell’s German experiences “generated a kind of free space for imaginative play within the stories” (85).

<5>Following the discussion of Jameson, the Howitts, and Gaskell, Hughes’s argument shifts as she turns to the most canonical writer in her study. Marian Evans, later George Eliot (1819–80), translated important German work and traveled to Germany with George Henry Lewes, first in 1854 to 1855; the impact of Germany on her work has been well studied. Yet Hughes also shows that, in comparison to the women of previous chapters, Evans was much less open to German culture and people. In part, this was because she was traveling with Lewes, whose previous experiences in the country shielded Evans from the need to engage deeply with German culture. She thus turned away from the possibilities Germany offered for ethnoexocentric exchange as well as its greater freedoms for women.

<6>These attitudes shifted in her later life, and George Eliot was more open to Anglo-German exchange. Hughes shows the artistic importance of Germany to her work, giving particular emphasis to the intertextual relationship between *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and the work of Paul Heyse, whose story “The Lonely Ones” is, she argues, a source for Grandcourt’s yachting accident. But here too Eliot’s engagement with Germany is less extensive than that of a much less well-known author, Jesse Fothergill (1851–1891). Fothergill’s novel *The First Violin* (1878) is also in intertextual relation to Heyse’s work (as well as to *Deronda*). Hughes shows that *First Violin* is informed by Heyse’s *Kinder der Welt* (*Children of the World*, 1873), presenting a “saturated Anglo-Germanism.” Germany, in Hughes’s account, offers the novel’s heroine, May, an alternative to the norms of gender in England and anticipates the New Woman.

<7>The New Woman becomes a central figure in the second half of the study, as Hughes turns from Eliot and Fothergill to Michael Field (Katharine Bradley, 1846–1914, and Edith Cooper, 1862–1913) and Amy Levy (1861–89). All college-educated, the Fields and Levy traveled independently in Germany, the Fields in the 1890s and Levy in the 1880s. Hughes shows, however, that the Fields repeated the experience of Marian Evans: traveling together, they could turn towards one another instead of turning outwards to experience sustained cultural encounter. Levy was more open, both in her personal encounters and in the fiction that she based on those encounters. Translation comes to the fore in this chapter, as a key element in the Fields’ poetic projects, and as especially central to Levy’s work, which, Hughes argues, is shaped by “creative assimilation” of Heinrich Heine in particular (155).

<8>The study’s final two chapters focus on two women who lived in Germany with their families: Elizabeth von Arnim (née Mary Beauchamp, 1866–1941) and Vernon Lee (née Violet Paget, 1856–1935). Hughes tracks how von Arnim’s life as an expatriate around the turn of the twentieth century was central to her creativity and artistic work, and shows how her books shift productively between English and German perspectives. Vernon Lee, who grew up traveling around Europe, is often considered in relation to Italy, but Hughes argues for the importance of Germany to her work, tracing the influence on Lee’s supernatural stories of German fairy tales and Lee’s German-speaking governess, Marie Schülpach, and considering the importance of Germany to Lee’s novella *Otilie* (1883), a feminist take on the German *Sturm und Drang* movement.

<9>Hughes’s study uncovers an important pattern among nineteenth-century British women writers; her thesis about the appeal of German freedom for them is frequently compelling, as are her accounts about how expatriate experiences shaped their work.

The book leaves more questions open when it comes to the influence of German art and literature. Why was German art so important to British women writers? In part, the argument seems to be that Germany was an appealing country, and that women who went there were then inspired to engage with its art, but this argument is not fully effective in the cases of George Eliot and Michael Field, who were less open to the opportunities that Germany afforded. A fuller picture of Germany's place in the British literary and cultural field might have been helpful in developing the answer to this question.

<10>Nonetheless, there is much here that is convincing, and a few threads seem especially generative. First, queer sexuality links many of the writers in this study: the Fields, Levy, Lee, Jameson's experiences of intense female friendships, Fothergill's representation of queer family. Hughes suggests that the experience of desire outside social norms may have made some of these writers more open to the cultural alternatives that Germany offered. The book as a whole indicates that Germany in particular, and perhaps expatriate experience more broadly, are imbricated with queer sexuality.

<11>Second, several instances show that experiences with German culture made some women less likely to treat non-Western people as inscrutable others. Hughes argues that Jameson's ethnoexocentrism, developed in Germany, made her open to Ojibwa women she later met in Canada, and led her to "adopt subject positions unusual for a European woman" (43). Anna Mary Howitt had similar experiences within Germany, where a Christmas celebration at a German family's home also included five Muslim Egyptian men studying in Munich, with whom Anna Mary discussed experiences of studying abroad.

<12>Finally, Eliot's role in the study is delightfully unexpected. The author we might have anticipated would be a hero of ethnoexocentrism turns out to be one of the least adept practitioners among the women Hughes surveys. Her place here points to an unusual but potentially productive method for putting canonical authors alongside writers less well-known: the shortcomings of the canonical Eliot help to highlight the achievements of less familiar authors as participants in deep and life-changing cultural exchange.

<13>*Victorian Women Writers and the Other Germany* is an impressive work, scholarly and readable, a collective intellectual and artistic biography that weaves together its ten subjects in illuminating and revelatory ways. Scholars of these authors should certainly consult Hughes's work, and students of the global nineteenth century will want to consider her account of how these Victorian

women's German experiences shaped their sense of themselves as citizens of the world.