

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Sparks, Tabitha. *Victorian Metafiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022. 212 pp.

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<1>Literary history is full of stereotypes and shorthands, generalizations that scholars know can't possibly be rigorously true but still assign a kind of heuristic value. One such generalization is the linkage between metafiction and (post)modernism, the idea that the twentieth century saw "an artistically manifested self-consciousness about the processes of fiction-making the like of which had not been seen in the novel since the end of the eighteenth century" (Alter 139). Another is the idea that nineteenth-century writing by women is dominated by an "impulse towards autobiography" that treats writing "as a method of self-expression" (Woolf 78). Tabitha Sparks's 2022 *Victorian Metafiction* thoroughly dismantles each of these suppositions, but most powerfully, it illuminates how they can act as two sides of the same sexist coin. Too often, scholarship has taken the same techniques—self-referentiality, thematization of creative process, narration of the social and material conditions of publication—and interpreted them variously as boldly experimental or autobiographically confessional depending on the author's gender.

<2>*Victorian Metafiction* uses narratology, feminist theory, and adroit close readings of a wide array of nineteenth-century works to show how Victorian novelists used innovative narrative techniques to construct a new cultural concept of the professional woman writer. Writers across the Victorian period used metafiction as a means of worldmaking, creating new imaginative and practical possibilities out of the dynamic interplay between text and life by "exposing novel writing as a process vulnerable to social and personal circumstances" (6).

<3>One reason the tendencies Sparks identifies have been largely overlooked, she suggests, is the closed circuitry of canon, which fabricates the very patterns it then treats as evidence. The book's theoretical introduction therefore concludes with four brief case studies of popular novels—*Ruth Hall*, *A Woman's Story*, *Nigel Bartram's Ideal*, and *Red Pottage*—that span from American midcentury sentimentalism to *fin-*

de-siècle “New Woman” writing and all emphasize logistical and cultural barriers to women writing. Sparks shows how each novel used writer-protagonists not as biographical surrogates but as authorial prostheses, fictional proxies who could engage in self-promotion, cultural and sexual exploration, or thematic ambition in ways unavailable to the novelists themselves.

<4>The first-person narrators, *roman à clef* elements, and emotional intensity of Charlotte Brontë’s novels have made them paradigmatic for critics who seek “to put the woman writer back into her fiction” (48). Sparks’s first chapter, on *Villette*, flips this script entirely, arguing that the cagey, capricious narrator Lucy Snowe resists (rather than reflects) psychologism, with Brontë drawing on Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* to create a reflexive metafiction that insists on the novel as “a mode of art rather than an extension of self” (66). Lucy’s inscrutability becomes a theorization of fictionality, one that responds directly to misreaders of Brontë’s earlier fiction through a constant emphasis on *Villette*’s own textuality. Brontë’s gaps and elisions insist that we read Lucy as a character rather than a “self,” one whose secrets remain emphatically undecidable.

<5>If *Villette* undermines autobiographical reading through its narratorial withholding, Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower*, the focus of chapter two, constructs its metafiction by emphasizing autobiography’s own status as a constructed, literary form. Broughton’s “digressive and anecdotal style” (71) combines with metafictional strategies of fragmentation and mediation (such as an “editor” figure suspiciously aligned with the narrator) to foreground the artificiality, or even impossibility, of constructing a holistic representation of a life out of discrete successive experiences. Broughton’s experimental temporalities, particularly Nell’s use of the historical present verb tense, along with the novel’s vast referential field, which is parodically constructed to reflect the narrator’s culturally-imposed ignorance, are revealed as strategies to circumvent the feedback loop of a literary marketplace that foreclosed experiences for women and then condemned their fiction for its inexperience of life. By thematizing autobiographic failure, Broughton’s metafiction reshapes what counts as experience.

<6>Chapter three centers on Charlotte Riddell’s *A Struggle for Fame*, which Sparks argues extends earlier critiques of the literary marketplace to “expand the horizons of women’s art” (92) by constructing a literary type of the professional woman writer. Riddell displaces tropes of inborn genius with depictions of professional savvy; heroine Glen’s “increasingly commodified understanding of success” (99) enables her to create, and to metafictionally inhabit, a form of writing “lifelike in its conscious deviation from the conventions associated with fiction” (105). The chapter

sets up Margaret Oliphant as a foil for Riddell, presenting her *The Athelings* as “ironically self-cancelling” (92) because its conservative sexual politics require a concept of genius that obfuscates any sense of the novel’s fictive self-awareness. Virginia Woolf famously condemned Oliphant for having *too* commodified a concept of success; Sparks suggests instead that Oliphant’s problem, at least in this early novel, was a failure to sufficiently thematize the dilemma through metafiction.

<7>While Sparks’s first three chapters focus primarily on strategies of (mostly first-person) narration, the subsequent two chapters contextualize their close readings more explicitly within a theorization of our own reading practices. Chapter four, which covers Julia Frankau (Frank Danby)’s *Doctor Philips*, Margaret Harkness (John Law)’s *A City Girl*, and Eliza Lynn Linton’s *Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland*, explores the interpretive purchase of applying the lessons of Brontë, Broughton, and Riddell by reading these later novels “through the techniques of postmodern metafiction” (118). This strategy enables brief but fascinating analyses of the Jewish Frankau’s supposedly anti-Semitic novel as a formally complex satire on prejudice, of the relation between Harkness’s performance of authorial self-erasure and naturalist determinism, and of Linton’s deconstruction of autobiography as a genre of self-expression; these writers land in “a kind of proto-postmodern exile from a world where words and things align” (119). More generally, the chapter upends the common reading of Victorian pseudonymous publication as merely or straightforwardly a strategy to avoid prejudiced reception. Brontë, like George Eliot, George Sand, and others, retained her pseudonym long after her identity became public knowledge; the rubric of metafiction underscores the interpretive perversity of treating these pseudonyms biographically, rather than as a tool helping separate the biographical author from the textual construct.

<8>The final chapter, on Grant Allen (Olive Pratt Rayner)’s *The Type-Writer Girl* and Emily Morse Symonds (George Paston)’s *A Writer of Books*, extends Sparks’s methodological suggestion further, proposing a reading of these late-century works as a kind of Neo-Victorian fiction *avant la lettre*. Rejecting the interpretation of these novels as inadequate realism, the chapter shows instead that they constitute a kind of metacommentary on realism and its codes, a “subversion of Victorian literary technique” (128) operating as politicized experiment in form. The possibility of this reflexive cultural critique builds on the constitution traced in earlier chapters of the “professional type [...] disconnected from any *actual* woman novelist” (140), the target figure of Allen’s female pseudonym. “Female achievement,” Sparks shows, “becomes a disembodied subjective type, and so conceivable by men as well as women” (141), enabling these novels to historicize their own form in real-time.

<9>The authors discussed in *Victorian Metafiction* used innovative metafictional techniques to reshape their culture's sense of what literature by women could be, constructing autonomous artworks in the face of a resistant market. In this invigorating monograph, Sparks orchestrates an analogous maneuver in the face of scholarly valorizations of self-expression as the presumptive ideal of feminist fiction. She uncovers in its place, hiding in plain sight, an intensely experimental, culturally prevalent tradition of Victorian metafiction, the impact of which has been deceptively erased. *Victorian Metafiction* thus enables vital new understandings of nineteenth-century narrative form, of the periodization of metafiction in literary history, and of the trajectory fiction by women in English.

Works Cited

Alter, Robert. *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005.