

Jan-Melissa Schramm. *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1-107-2126-6. US\$99.00/£55.00.

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The ending of Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities* is one of the most familiar scenes in Victorian fiction, and Sydney Carton's memorable last words, as he submits to the guillotine in the place of someone else—"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known"—might well symbolize the Victorians' investment in an ethical poetics of high-minded sentimentality. It is precisely this investment, and the complex of ideas and beliefs that underlie the moral economy of self-sacrifice, that Jan-Melissa Schramm's important new book attempts to recover for modern readers. The exemplary fate of Sydney Carton is just one of her case studies, but its enduring cultural resonance is registered in the appealing portrait chosen for the cover illustration of this study.

Schramm analyzes the prevalence of narratives of atonement, scapegoating and substitution in the long nineteenth century as an expression of an ethical crisis, deriving particularly from challenges to traditional Christian belief from Unitarianism and Utilitarianism. Her main focus is on the mid-Victorian generation, writers "who tried to remain in active conversation with Christian values" (4)—Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, William Godwin, Charles Reade, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and many others. The study locates their literary explorations

in a context that includes the social and political challenges of Chartism and the Crimean War as well as the discourses of theology and philosophy. As a work of historicist criticism, *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* presents a richly textured account of the debates of the time, and the traditions of thought that underlie them, adducing many passages from historical sources that distill key arguments and concepts of sacrifice and substitution. Equally central to the book's purpose, however, is to explore the contribution of literary creativity to these debates, to understand both the specific tropes and the broader aesthetic values that writers brought to this emerging cultural imaginary. Schramm's account of these literary interventions identifies three major issues at stake, namely, subjectivity, sympathy, and "the role of vicarious experience," which shed light not only on the writers' beliefs but also on the institution of literature, on what she calls "Victorian understandings of the reading process and its value" for readers (2). In her discussions of sympathy, sacrifice, justice, and the other components of her study, Schramm draws on current philosophical and anthropological research, putting her nineteenth-century sources into dialogue with more recent theorists such as Marcel Mauss, René Girard, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur, and ensuring that the work is historicist in the largest sense, in that the interpreter's understandings of the past and the present are interconnected.

Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative demonstrates the "intense interpenetration" (174) of literary texts and theological, legal, and philosophical debates, through a series of cultural controversies involving one or other form of vicarious action: from the substitutionary deaths of Jesus Christ and metaphoric Christs such as Carton to scapegoat figures such as Stephen Blackpool, to legal advocates who speak for criminals, to readers positioned to sympathize with

criminals such as Eugene Aram or John Barton, to cases of imposture. Thus Schramm traces what I think of as vectors of vicariousness rippling in different directions through this interdiscursive field, lighting up questions of criminal punishment, theological debates about the Atonement, controversies about the ethics of advocacy, and such cultural practices as public executions, public readings and sensational trials. Although the concept of vicarious experience is applied to quite varied situations, it is never forced or strained. The argument proceeds through a demonstration of intertextual links across the spheres of literature, law, theology and philosophy. These investigations into discursive commonalities and variations are supplemented by the analysis of contemporaneous events, social dramas perhaps (to use Victor Turner's term) in which the intellectual disputes took public and political form: the trials of the Chartist leaders in Chapter Three, or the National Days of Humiliation declared after the defeat in the Crimean War in Chapter Four, and the Tichborne affair in Chapter Five. Each of these events embodies a particular conjunction of vicarious suffering and ethical uncertainty that left its traces in imaginative, historical, and didactic texts. By teasing out such traces, Schramm reveals how the Atonement controversy ramified throughout Victorian culture, and analyses the "cultural work" performed by those texts.

At the conclusion of her fourth chapter, Schramm makes the bold claim that sacrifice was "the central idea of the age" (180). However, her critical interpretations of its "rhetoric and performance" (216) across a multiplicity of cultural sites are always cogent and persuasive. The interconnections that she reveals in this series of particularized readings back up her claim through their range and subtlety. This quality may be epitomized through a brief summary of the matter covered in a single chapter. Any chapter would serve equally well to demonstrate the sense of apposition

and inter-illumination that results from this method, but I will choose Chapter Three, “Standing for the People”: beginning with the trials of the Chartist leaders in 1848, and the evidence of threatened assassinations led against them, it outlines Dickens’s journalistic response to their conviction; that leads into an account of Dickens and his anxieties about political oratory; thence to Dickens on forensic eloquence, and his belief in juries, which Schramm argues served as a model of his imagined readership; from the compromised voices of professional advocates, she turns to the importance of characters’ voices in Dickens’s fiction; thereafter follows a succinct discussion of the ethical implications of Dickens’s own public readings, and the extent to which vicarious emotion and identification enters into any performance of others’ voices; the argument then moves to consider Dickens’s readings of his trial scenes, and what the movement of his sympathies in those scenes implies about attitudes to law and crime; and finally the chapter culminates in an analysis of Gaskell’s representation of Chartist violence in *Mary Barton* (1848), which is informed by all the details just adduced. All of the vectors of vicariousness that Schramm identifies are explored with a similar level of depth and breadth.

Schramm argues that the “intensification of interest” in sacrifice was “multi-factorial in genesis” (216), but it is equally true that her analysis of it is multi-factorial. For this reason, I believe that *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* is a significant contribution to the practice of historical criticism as well as to interdisciplinary Victorian studies. There have been a number of excellent recent monographs on law and Victorian literature, among them Clare Pettitt’s *Patent Inventions* (2004), Christine L. Krueger’s *Reading for the Law: British Literary History and Gender Advocacy* (2010) and Ayelet Ben-Yishai’s *Common Precedents* (2013). By introducing into her exploration of law and literature a third disciplinary

field, theology, Schramm's contextualization gains in richness and conviction, reminding this reviewer of the effect of triangulation in the social sciences. While there is an honorable tradition in historical criticism whereby scholars develop a contextual and theoretical framework that provides the terms for a sophisticated close reading of an individual text, Schramm's method is to assemble a concatenation of texts that address similar concerns, and whose meanings can be revealed through what the American law and literature scholar Brook Thomas calls "cross-examination." The result is to multiply the number of texts that receive detailed critical commentary; to represent context as a multi-dimensional and shifting terrain; and to subtilize the ideological analysis of the literature and the culture. Schramm has astute insights into the gender politics of the moral economy of sacrifice and suffering, concluding for example that, in the recurrent motif of wrongful accusation, gender plays "a significant role in the offences for which the protagonists were to be offered up: men's alleged criminal activity usually arose from the spectre of Chartist upheaval, and women's transgressions were determined by their sexual choices and activities" (218). In her discussion of Jem Wilson in *Mary Barton*, Schramm rehearses one model of political criticism, framing a question: "Whether Gaskell's achievement is radical (the public valorization of Jem) or conservative (the silencing of the physical-force Chartists) ..." (137)—only to relocate that question within a more complex account of the period's ethics and politics of representation.

The work is excellently presented. I noted a few typographical errors, which will be worth correcting if the book does go into a second edition, as it deserves. On p. 92 Caleb Williams should yield to "an ungoverned curiosity." On p. 150, the quotation from John McLeod Campbell makes better sense as, "the nature of the

atonement is nothing else than the question, What is Christianity?" On p. 206, did Charles Reade's adaptation of *Ralph the Heir* "imitate" or "irritate" Trollope?

Jan-Melissa Schramm's *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* is an erudite and absorbing study. In addition to a productive immersion among nineteenth-century sources in law, philosophy, literature, and theology, her argument is sharpened by a comprehensive and scrupulous engagement with modern scholarship on Victorian literature, yielding a set of incisive critical articulations.

Biographical notice:

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