

FORTHCOMING IN RAVON #61 (APRIL 2012)

Lorraine Janzen Kooistra. *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing: The Illustrated Gift Book and Victorian Visual Culture, 1855-1875*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011. ISBN: 9780821419649. Price: US\$59.95/£49.35.

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I doubt that most readers have thought deeply about the illustrated Christmas gift books of the 1860s. But Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's book reveals fascinating information in a genre that has never been considered worthy of sustained study before. These illustrated volumes offer "new ways of looking at the place of poetry in the high Victorian period," Kooistra claims, specifically discussing the ways that this "hybrid multimedia form mediating 'high' and popular art, the gift book's corporate authorship and feminine readership intervene in literary history to challenge romantic notions of individual creators and consecrated canons" (249). As these lines suggest, Kooistra is especially interested in five areas: the material history of the book, female readership and authorship, high art versus popular audiences, the interaction between visual images and written lines, and personal testimony versus mechanical reproduction. The gift book sits at the crossroads of these values, and Kooistra does a consistently masterful job of reading the tensions, compromises, failures, and recalibrations necessary to bring poetry and pictures into line with each other and with the marketplace, especially as both readership and visual technologies changed.

Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing begins with a brief introduction stressing the materiality of the book, but its first substantive chapter treats the Moxon Tennyson, which Kooistra argues reinvented poetry as a middlebrow, mass-market commodity. She offers admirable readings of the clash between the Pre-Raphaelites' and the Academicians' illustrations, each demonstrating different understandings of art's relation to poetry. The Moxon edition of Alfred Tennyson's illustrated *Poems* came out in 1857, making it the earliest case study in this volume, and its supposed failure—the competing styles alienated its first readers—helped shape the gift-book market of the 1860s.

Chapter 3 turns to the Dalziel Brothers, who developed “a new kind of ekphrastic poetry for the gift-book market” (103). The enormous success of the illustrated periodical, which Kooistra compares with the developments of our own digital age, made a whole new consumption of images possible. The volumes spoke to a female readership whose conventional preferences for pleasant scenes of pastoral and domestic comfort were rewarded with work from name-brand artists. It is a pleasure to follow Kooistra's attentive readings of the interplay between image and text, as for instance she reads Arthur Boyd Houghton's illustration for Dora Greenwell's “A Child's Garden” as a dialogue of unsettling wildness amidst the cozy atmosphere (116-117).

How did the Christmas gift books sell transatlantic popular female poets like Eliza Cook, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Jean Ingelow, considered “second-rate poets for second-rate readers”? Their poetry was “narrative in nature, direct in expression, musical in appeal, and affective or sentimental in content” (131). Kooistra discusses how each poet worked, or didn't work, for gift books. Cook's democratic, working-class politics,

not to mention the open secret of her lesbianism, consorted oddly with the fancy gift-book format, while Procter's upper-middle class status and idealized early death made for a better fit. Ingelow, whose poems were particularly prized for oral recitations, could sustain an acceptably feminized presentation. These popular illustrated gift books offered familiar, accessible, pleasing images and language, cementing the association between popular readerships and mass culture (177).

In her final chapter, Kooistra returns to Tennyson. In this chapter, she traces how the corporate nature of the gift book meant that Tennyson lost artistic control. Unable to dictate the work of his illustrators, determine the layout of his poems, or demand the sole attention of his readers, Tennyson hated publishing in this venue. Moreover, the feminized associations of the gift book affected Tennyson's reception. As Kooistra writes, "In our intense focus on the poetic word, we lose an opportunity to touch and see the past—to get a sense of how these verses expressed their meanings in physical formats to nineteenth-century readers." This oversight "shows how committed we remain to a romantic ideology of poetry as the creative expression of individual genius—the disembodied voice and inspired breath of the poet. But breath cannot exist outside a living body, and bodies are always enmeshed in human social relationships" (180). This chapter restores our sense of the book as a product of many makers, dictated by material and technological conditions, and directed towards readers. Kooistra explores the exciting archival finds of Daniel Maclise's drafts of his illustrations for "The Princess," and does a magisterial reading of the images (including the covers) of "Enoch Arden."

The illustrated Christmas gift book, however, died out in the 1870s. It was partly a victim of technological improvements, as wood-engravings were increasingly replaced

by photography, and partly affected by changes in style, as slim aesthetic art-publications made the enormous gilded tomes of yesteryear seem outmoded. Moreover, illustrated volumes became associated with an audience of children instead of women. After the 1870s, illustrated poetry books functioned as a cultural status marker, moving from a feminized, sentimentalized object displayed on tables, to a uniform edition to sit on shelves in a library, attesting to its owner's education.

As I hope this summary has made clear, *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing* is exemplary in its attention to the material details of the publishing industry, and it is studded with wonderful readings of how pictures introduce unintended stanza breaks, alter the poem's elements, or problematize the poem's supposed aims. It should be required reading for anyone interested in the history of the book, nineteenth-century popular reading practices, Victorian poetry, or mass-market publishing.

But, as I read Kooistra, I found myself worrying whether those readers would in fact tackle this book. The biggest problem here—and it is one never addressed by Kooistra—is the extremely narrow nature of her subject. She is addressing a single genre in a single decade (plus a few years on either side). Who will want to read 249 pages on the illustrated Christmas gift books of the 1860s? Who else works on this subject, or has enough interest to sustain such close attention to it?

Kooistra needed to make a strong plea that one can see enormous cultural forces best when focused on a small test case, or, alternatively, she needed to attend to other developments alongside the Christmas gift book so as to broaden the scope of this study. It is to her credit that Kooistra never loses faith in the importance of her genre, but she forgets that the reader may not have the same belief, and she needs to reach out and

convince us. My copy of *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing* is dotted with somewhat frustrated marginal notes: “what about William Morris?” “how does this compare to the Illustrated London News?” “isn’t this the same dynamic as the Victorian preference for plaster reproductions?” I wanted a version of this book that read “poetry, pictures, and popular publishing” over a wider range of genres and a longer stretch of time, or, at the very least, gave a compelling argument for limiting the subject as drastically as she does here.

I fear, in other words, that people are going to miss an excellent study, and so I will take this opportunity to say this to the readers of *RaVoN*: overcome whatever reluctance you might feel at the prospect of reading hundreds of pages about 1860s illustrated poetic Christmas gift books, and enjoy a seasoned, alert, intelligent guide showing you fascinating meanings in the lines—and between the lines—of both poetry and pictures, and making you think anew about the way they shaped each other in the age of mass-produced publishing.

Biographical Notice:

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PRE-PUBLICATION