

Christine Huguet and Simon J. James, eds. *George Gissing and the Woman Question: Convention and Dissent*. Farnham, UK, and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2013. ISBN: 978-1409466581. Price: US\$109.95/£60.00.

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That the late-Victorian author with the most romantic personal history—a novelist who committed larceny and served time in prison to rescue the prostitute whom he adored—should have expressed objectionable views on women in his work is a perpetual source of disappointment to idealists everywhere. But there is no getting around the fact: George Gissing (1857–1903) sometimes wrote as though he were a convicted wife-slayer, rather than a man who gave up all for love. Surely the most flagrant example of his frightening level of misogyny occurred when, late in his career, he analyzed Charles Dickens’s creation, Mrs. Joe Gargery, from *Great Expectations*. In *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), Gissing commented not just approvingly, but almost gleefully, on her fate and extrapolated from it to endorse a similar end for difficult women in general:

Mrs. Gargery shall be brought to quietness; but how? By a half-murderous blow on the back of her head, from which she will never recover. Dickens understood by this time that there is no other efficacious way with these ornaments of their sex. A felling and stunning and all but killing blow,

followed by paralysis and slow death. A sharp remedy, but no whit sharper than the evil it cures. (Gissing 143)

It is true that Gissing suffered extreme domestic unhappiness himself, having endured both a bad marriage to the prostitute for whom he had sacrificed his hopes of upward mobility and then a subsequent union to a woman who went mad. Still, he knew (and corresponded with) a wide variety of intelligent, progressive women, including some who were writers, and whose positive examples should have been enough to persuade him of the injustice of such appalling sentiments.

Curiously, none of the essayists in *George Gissing and the Woman Question* cites his infamous pronouncements from that 1898 study of Dickens. All are, nonetheless, well aware of what a problematic figure he was, especially when weighing in on the so-called Woman Question of the late-Victorian period. He could, on the one hand, appear to close ranks with feminists, in a novel such as *The Odd Women* (1893), and support their advocacy of greater access to education, employment, and financial self-sufficiency, even as, in his 1896 short story “At High Pressure,” he sneered openly at the ambitions of a lower-middle-class woman to push her way into mainstream British cultural life and pass on her knowledge of it to younger girls. (But at least he did not, like his close friend H. G. Wells, chiefly promote feminism for its potential to liberate women sexually and thus allow him to seduce large numbers of them.)

In their Introduction to this volume, the editors Christine Huguet and Simon J. James bend over backwards to remain sympathetic to Gissing by asserting that it was devotion to form, rather than offensive political beliefs or personal animus, that

determined the contents of his fiction. They argue that a single-minded “commitment” to “literary realism” lay behind all his choices: “His finest representations of female subjectivity do not serve the function of stalking-horses for particular feminist or anti-feminist causes,” they claim, for “when his work is at its best, such characters just autonomously are, as they are, and it is often left to the reader to make their [sic] own, often difficult judgements on the rights or wrongs of the particular case” (1-2). Thus, they concur with Gissing himself in labeling his texts “aesthetic artefacts, not manifestoes,” and suggest that he merely followed wherever his understanding of reality led, as he drew his fictional portraits of women (2). Of course, this view of his “best” work as essentially apolitical and driven by observation, rather than by a controlling social purpose, will not account for *New Grub Street* (1891), which is surely among his “finest” novels, yet also a rip-roaring polemic, decrying the state of the literary profession and, along the way, attacking the heartlessness of a wife who stubbornly asks her high-minded husband to compromise his artistic standards and support his needy family.

On the subject of women and the roles that they should play in the modern age, Gissing is spectacularly inconsistent, and the thirteen contributors to this useful volume quite sensibly choose to lay bare his many contradictions, rather than try to fit him into a box. The writers of these studies are an international group (with academics from several European countries, along with the United Arab Emirates, participating) and members of multiple generations; they include a mix of eminent Victorianists, feminists, gender scholars, and Gissing specialists—everyone from Adrienne Munich, David Grylls, and Rosemary Jann to Emma Liggins, Diana Maltz, and Tara MacDonald, among other familiar names. The women among them, however, greatly outnumber the men, although

it is unclear whether this is merely a coincidence, or whether male critics are simply less interested in discussing why Gissing represented women as he did.

Readers expecting thought-provoking perspectives on Gissing's major novels will not be disappointed. Debbie Harrison and Anthony Patterson separately tackle, for instance, *The Nether World* (1889) and do so from interesting angles. Harrison looks closely at female alcoholism in the novel and finds that characters "tormented" by it are depicted "with great sympathy and interest," rather than merely held up for opprobrium (135). In "It's 'Ard on a Feller: Female Violence and the Culture of Refinement in Gissing's *The Nether World*," Patterson captures well the complexity of Gissing's attitudes toward working-class women, who are drawn simultaneously as repellant and as appealingly tempestuous: "The violent woman as epitomized by Clem Peckover may be viewed as symptomatic of the potential violence of all women, or as a trope of the emerging working-class mob, or, indeed, as an index of national degeneration, but she is also figured as dangerously attractive, a perverse but alluring contrast to middle-class conventions and restrictions" (104). Both Harrison and Patterson link the representations of women in this novel to Gissing's disastrous marriage to Nell Harrison, the prostitute whom he tried to 'save.' Roger Milbrandt explores this biographical material more fully in "Gissing's Nell: Her Body and His Text," although her specter also hangs over David Grylls's analysis, in "Gissing and Prostitution," of how thoroughly unconventional Gissing's views of female prostitutes and their male clients were in *The Unclassed*—especially in its 1884 three-volume incarnation, rather than in the revised edition of 1895 (20). Emphasis on men and on their responses to women—whether to so-called "fallen" women or to the feminist "New Women" of the 1890s—continues in Constance D.

Harsh's chapter, which ends with an account of *New Grub Street* as a work that "simultaneously critiques and longs for masculine power" (37). Tara MacDonald focuses squarely on this issue in "Gissing's Failed New Men: Masculinity in *The Odd Women*," persuasively reading the novel not merely as a meditation on newly emancipated women, but on the absence of men who are ready either to treat them as equals or, in fact, to be their equals; thus, she implicitly aligns Gissing's perspective with the complaints of contemporary feminist writers, who foresaw a long wait before the much-desired "New Man" appeared on the scene.

Studies of explicit resemblances between Gissing's novels and work by other writers—whether those who influenced him or who were influenced by him—dominate several other chapters. Debbie Harrison introduces the subject of intertextuality briefly, when naming Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877) as a precursor for Gissing's approach to female alcoholism, but there are more extended examinations of Gissing's relations with French literature in Adrienne Munich's wise and informative essay on shopgirls (which connects Monica Madden from *The Odd Women* to her counterparts in Zola's 1883 *Au Bonheur des Dames*). So, too, M. D. Allen compares *Born in Exile* (1892) with Paul Bourget's 1889 *Le Disciple*, though Allen scarcely mentions anything to do with the Woman Question along the way. More clearly related to the volume's theme are two very fine essays: Diana Maltz's discussion of female "pathology" (172) in Gissing's *The Whirlpool* (1897), alongside a brilliant meditation on May Sinclair's unjustly forgotten 1897 *Audrey Craven*, from her pre-Modernist period; and Maria Teresa Chialant's dissection of the concept of the late-Victorian "Woman of Letters," a figure who exists only at the margins of *New Grub Street*, but takes center stage in Ella Hepworth Dixon's

fiction. Cristina Ceron, on the other hand, links Gissing to popular literature by positing *The Odd Women* as an anti-romance, written to critique the deleterious effects of reading sentimental novels.

But those familiar with the Gissing canon and with the equally large canon of Gissing criticism will be glad to find excellent essays that go beyond the novels, into the under-studied territory of his short stories. Emma Liggins focuses on “spinsters,” while Rosemary Jann takes up domesticity more broadly, though a story such as “Comrades in Arms,” which only Liggins mentions (81), could well have played a central role in both essays. Indeed, for feminist readers who, despite Gissing’s mixed record on the topic of women, wish to go on liking and admiring him, there is no better reason to do so than “Comrades in Arms,” which ends not with a strong woman being “brought to quietness” by a “half-murderous blow” (Gissing 143), but actively enjoying her work as a journalist, her unmarried life, and her friendship with a man who respects her as both a writer and a person. With this story, Gissing provided one answer to the Woman Question that is worth celebrating.

#### Works Cited

Gissing, George. *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. London: Blackie and Son, 1898.

#### Biographical Notice:

Margaret D. Stetz is the Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women’s Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware. She has been curator or co-

curator of numerous exhibitions on late-Victorian print culture and author of more than 100 scholarly articles published in journals and edited volumes. Her books include *Facing the Late Victorians*, *British Women's Comic Fiction, 1890-1990*, and others. In 1975, she wrote her M. A. thesis at the University of Sussex on George Gissing and is proud that one of her earliest essays appeared in the *Gissing Journal*.