

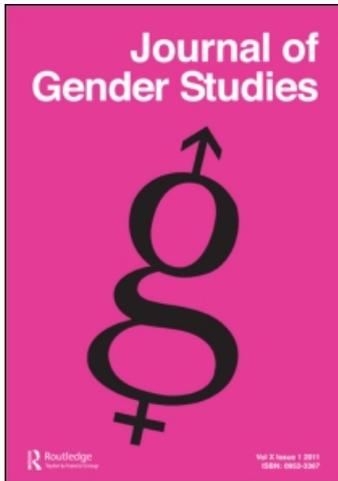
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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **The gendering of global finance**

LIBBY ASSASSI, 2009

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

215 pp., ISBN 978 0 230 51793 6, £45.63 (hardback)

The timing of this book could not have been more appropriate: as it went to press the global financial system seemed in imminent danger of collapse, but by 2010, despite unprecedented state action to prop up the banks that were deemed ‘too big to fail’ and some minor changes to the regulatory systems in advanced industrial economies, business as usual had been re-established. However, something perhaps has changed: there is a growing awareness that the modern financial system, its key actors and its daily practices, are imbued with gendered assumptions. What if, asked Harriet Harman – then deputy leader of the UK Labour government – Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters? In this interesting book Assassi both takes this rhetorical question seriously and moves beyond its immediacy. By a careful analysis of gender as an analytical category, she connects the everyday social practices of financial institutions with the structural features of the global economy over the sustained historical period during which modern financial markets emerged.

The book began life as a doctoral thesis, changing over the period of its production in response to the global crisis. The introductory chapter begins with the global credit crunch, highlighting the integral importance of reckless risk taking by testosterone-fuelled men, rejecting neo-classical economic theory with its notion of the rational economic man. However, it moves quickly to its central thesis – that ‘modern systems of finance, banking and credit are based on private property forms which historically involved limiting the direct access of women to financial security’ (p. 2). Assassi’s aim is to show how across time and space in diverse cultures, women have been denied financial security. Her perspective is very different from conventional studies of the behaviour of financial actors; it is one which has parallels with Engels’ analysis of the origins of women’s subjection in private property, although this is a connection not mentioned by Assassi. Her stated aim is to challenge conventional stories about the working of global finance that dominate the literatures of international relations (IR) and global political economy (GPE), literatures in which gendered financial structures currently remain invisible.

The first objective, as laid out in the introduction, is to reconstruct a history of women’s involvement in the financial sectors in the past: a detective story in which absence rather than presence is the dominant thread. As feminist historians of science and the social sciences have argued, women are often absent from the public sphere because of their association with nature, nurture and caring in private spaces, whereas man’s assumed acquisitive competitive nature finds expression in the public arena. Women, of course, have never been entirely absent from the world of money, visible actors as Assassi notes, in small-scale and localised activities such as credit institutions and pawnbroking. But, as formal markets expanded, women not only became more marginal but the operation of markets, the

ownership of assets and the accumulation of wealth deepened their subordination. This first chapter contains a good deal of interesting material, though none of it is new or unexplored. In my view, it also defines its object of knowledge too widely, ranging from the biases in social knowledge to micro-credit schemes, and from the domestic arena to dominant approaches in global political economy, defined as including neo-realism, liberalism and Marxism. Much of the material surveyed seems directed to the economic basis of women's subordination more generally rather than specifically towards the global financial system.

In succeeding chapters, Assassi draws together an interesting range of material in a synoptic and chronological analysis of the development of modern financial systems. Thus in Chapter 2, she (bravely) tackles the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the UK, showing how (most) women became invisible as economic actors, at least in the public arena. Chapter 3 then builds on this to assess the implications of the development of private individualised property rights while Chapter 4 moves into a fascinating analysis of the development of common law which included statutes to prevent women entering into contracts. The growth of the public/private divide is the focus of Chapter 5; this produced a gendered spatial division paralleled by the increasing division between competitive financial and banking activities dominated by men and by masculinised assumptions about the significance of production rather than consumption and reproduction. These systems became the basis for colonisation, international trade and investment and the current global financial system, which together with the development of particular forms of state welfare provision in post-1945 'advanced' economies, and development policies elsewhere, embedded and reinforced emerging gender divisions. Finally in Chapter 7, strategies are explored which challenge the exclusion of women from the ownership and management of wealth and which move towards a fairer share of income. This final chapter is one of the strongest as Assassi is clear-sighted and critical about the developing forms of credit which draw growing numbers of women into increased levels of debt which then result in their increased vulnerability to the fluctuations of financial markets. Assassi's trenchant critique of consumer choice is welcome, as is the argument about the continuing significance of place in a 'flat' world.

This is an excellent book for a reader interested in the connections between the development of markets, including financial markets, and the patterns of women's subordination. It is well-argued and well-supported and will become an invaluable resource for numerous courses not only in IR and GPE but all branches of economics, as well as development studies, geography, and social policy. Even so it is not quite as innovative as Assassi claims in the foreword. I should have liked a concluding section where questions about contemporary changes in household forms, in women's labour market participation, and their rising educational credentials were all considered. The financial institutions criticised in the main part of the book arose over decades in which women's position in many countries of the world was profoundly different from now, when many women are part of the same neo-liberal, competitive individualised worlds as men.

The extent to which the financial system is based on gendered assumptions in the sense of a set of attitudes, opportunities and actions specific to either men or women is now a more difficult question. It may be that the Lehman Sisters would have made exactly the same decisions as the Lehman Brothers and what we really need to analyse is not the gendering of global finance but its continual belief that a version of lightly regulated capitalism will continue to deliver rising standards of living.

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### **The politics of women's rights in Iran**

ARZOO OSANLOO, 2009

Princeton, NJ and Woodstock: Princeton University Press

258 pp., ISBN 978-0-691-13547-2, £15.15 (paperback)

The title of this book refers to at least two ways in which women's rights are political. The first is the negotiation over women's rights between different actors within the Islamic Republic of Iran; these include the government, the Council of Guardians, women's rights activists and ordinary women and men. The second refers to the negotiation over women's rights between the Islamic Republic and the international regime of women's and human rights. In the conclusion, the author, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, also alerts us to a third dimension of the politics of women's rights in Iran – that of the instrumentalisation of women's rights by neo-conservatives in the United States in justifying the so-called War on Terror and the re-making of the Middle East.

It is this third dimension that makes this book particularly significant, for: 'The effects of contemporary discourses of regime change that highlight women's rights can actually hurt internal reform movements more than they help them' (p. 207). The great strength of Arzoo Osanloo's work is to illuminate the debates over women's rights that have occurred in post-revolutionary Iran in the spaces between '... a dynamic and modern notion of Islam [and] newly developed and redeveloped political and legal institutions [that is] ... a distinctive form of modernity at the juncture of Islamic revivalism and Western political and legal institutions' (p. 8). It is the symbolic importance of cleansing Iranian women from Western influences after 1979 that makes Western pressure for women's rights in Iran liable to backfire.

The book is based on several years of ethnographic research in Tehran, between 1999 and 2004. This period corresponds, more or less, to the reformist presidency of Mohammed Khatami (1997–2005) and Arzoo captures the optimism and openness amongst many of her Iranian informants, who include middle class women attending Quranic reading groups, lawyers specialising in family law and officials of Iran's national women's machinery, amongst others. Throughout her book, the author demonstrates the agency of women in (re)interpreting women's rights and, in this process, redefining subjectivities and identities.

For example, women's Quranic reading groups are spaces where women discuss religious scripture with relevance to their own lives and problems, such as how to raise children, finding spiritual comfort or being good members of society:

Using Islamic principles to legitimize their work, the women at the meetings seek and find paths to individual agency, which lead to a discourse of empowerment and rights that is based on ideas that are expressed in terms like individual liberty, free will, and personal responsibility. (p. 84)

We see how this subjectivity operates within the context of Tehran's Municipal Court, when Goli, petitioning for divorce, explains to the author: 'This is my right; no one will give you your rights, you have to go after them' (p. 110). Rather than the state being a barrier to the performance of rights-bearing subjectivities, it facilitates such subjectivities through the codified form of Iran's 'Islamic-civil law' (p. 137).

In addition to identifying the debates over women's rights within domestic sites, Osanloo also examines how such debates infuse Iran's international relations. Rather than rejecting the international human rights regime, with all its Western connotations, Iran positions itself within it through the semi-official Islamic Human Rights Commission. This body should not be thought of as merely a fig leaf for Iran's human rights record. Osanloo argues that the IHRC

demonstrates the wealth of Iran's civilization vis-à-vis other Islamic states ... [rejects that] the 'west' is the sole locus of human rights ... [and] produces a discourse of human rights, which state agents, across a spectrum, may claim is native to their own culture and traditions. (p. 183)

Meanwhile, the Centre for Women's Participation (CWP) (formerly the Bureau of Women's Affairs and, since 2005, the Centre for Women and Family) is a part of the executive and has been responsible for Iran's signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as (unsuccessfully) recommending Iran's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – a key instrument in the international protection of women's rights. According to Ms Mowlaverdi, the international coordinator for legal affairs at CWP, CEDAW is not in conflict with Islam (p. 189).

The IHRC and the CWP demonstrate how human rights cannot be seen merely as Western impositions:

Instead, what constitutes perceptions of rights is more an amalgamation of many ideologies that come together within the context, in Iran, of Islamic and republic. We cannot say whether any or all of these sources exist inside or outside of Islam; indeed, these ideas determine Islam by being somehow related to Islam, and Islam determines the ideas in the context of the Islamic republic by embodying them – even if that relation is one of opposition. Thus these knowledge categories coexist and constitute one another. (pp. 197–198)

However, a geopolitical context in which countries are polarised according to a supposed opposition of Western-liberal vs. Islamic values is unable to recognise the much more complex and nuanced constitution of rights, identities and subjectivities in a globalised world.

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### **Feminist pedagogy: looking back to move forward**

ROBBIN D. CRABTREE, DAVID ALAN SAPP and ADELA C. LICONA, 2009  
 Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press  
 269 pp., ISBN 978 0 8018 9276 9, £17.10 (paperback)

*Feminist pedagogy: looking back to move forward* is a collection of articles published by The National Women's Studies Association Journal between 1989 and 2002. An editorial introduction is followed by three parts: Part I is a theoretical exploration of feminist pedagogy; Part II introduces classroom practices specific to feminist pedagogues; Part III deals with tensions that arise in teaching race issues in feminist classrooms. The volume ends with a useful bibliography on these issues. The categorization and order of the contents help the readers capture the thematic structure of the book.

The introduction (re)frames the concept of 'feminist pedagogy' as 'a movement against hegemonic educational practices that tacitly accept or more forcefully reproduce an oppressively gendered, classed, racialized, and androcentric social order' (p. 1). Referring to the history of feminist pedagogy the editors explain what makes certain pedagogies feminist and indicate the importance of intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. While the volume as a whole features real-life experiences of feminist pedagogues, the chapters illustrate different contexts and strategies for classroom practices. For example, in Chapter five (Part I), entitled 'Not for queers only: pedagogy and postmodernism', Johnston situates herself as an instructor on a course on sexuality during a

public wave of homophobia. She demonstrates the use of postmodernism in her pedagogy through problematizing the categorization of identity, sharing with the readers her specific strategies and course curriculum, and describing their effects. In Chapter seven (Part II), Freedman describes her students' reactions to her small group pedagogy, instrumental in 'consciousness-raising' during classes in feminist studies. The specific nature of these examples, recounting insights as well as mistakes, make them very informative for those looking for practical teaching techniques combining social justice and feminist pedagogy.

Nevertheless, as a non-white feminist scholar interested in a transnational understanding of women's experiences in higher education, I have a major criticism. There is a distinct lack of intersectional *analysis* of the concepts of 'women' and 'feminism'. The editors seem to be aware of this problem. They acknowledge that 'most of the authors seem to be white women' (p. 17). For example, originally published in 1991, Chapter one (as well as subsequent chapters) centre the issues of authority or source of power(less-ness) in the discussion of feminist pedagogy while debating only the implications of gender. In my opinion, however, issues of authority in the classroom are very complex and would necessitate an analysis of various facets of identity including class, race, ethnicity, spoken language, citizenship, disability *as well as* gender.

Although some authors explicitly mention the importance of intersectionality, most leave race and whiteness out of their focus. The editors do draw attention to how one of the contributors, Kim, incorporates 'important works by women of color feminists' and 'classical' feminist theory. Yet, this small mention gives race only a token place in the overall discussion of feminist pedagogy. This leaves the question of what 'feminist pedagogy' means if it only occasionally *adds* the racialization of practices, theories and environments. The collection thus (re)constructs images of feminist pedagogy as a largely white-centric theory and practice. So, despite the fact that the last two chapters centre their discussions on race, this still seems only a token acknowledgement.

Furthermore, to gain a broader perspective on 'pedagogy' (rather than 'teaching'), some macro-level discussions on higher education are also needed. For instance, the volume fails to give adequate consideration to pedagogical challenges and strategies raised during recent decades by changes in globalization and neo-liberalism. This has been investigated by Mohanty (2003) who asks some valid questions of what 'the processes of corporate globalization' are and 'how and why they recolonize women's bodies and labor' (p. 237). She argues that feminist activist teachers have to bring into the classroom the complexity of the power dynamic stemming from global capitalism which is interconnected with the local (Mohanty 2003).

As its subtitle *Looking back to move forward* suggests, there is a strong emphasis in this book on past feminist dialogues on pedagogy. Nevertheless, the volume does provide a good sense of what needs to be done in the future, for the next collection on feminist pedagogy, and in this sense achieves its objective. The targeted readers for this collection include junior faculty and stakeholders in women's studies, gender studies, and critical pedagogy.

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Kimine Mayuzumi  
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**Femininity in the frame: women and 1950s British popular cinema**

MELANIE BELL, 2010

London and New York: I.B. Tauris

226 pp., ISBN 978 1 84855 159 7, £16.99 (paperback)

The iconic image from British cinema of the 1950s is the grizzled face of an upper-middle-class military man, bleary-eyed from endless hours on the watch deck, or caked in mud and sweat after months of cramped digging beneath a German *schloss*, or nerves shattered during the course of a hundred anxious bombing missions over enemy territory. It is a gendered vision of 10 years of national cinema that has proved difficult to shift from the popular imagination, and only recently has scholarship carefully begun to excavate the industrial and textual practices of film in the final 'forgotten decade' of British cinema. It is therefore extremely pleasing to welcome an innovative study of women in popular British cinema in the 1950s, and one to put alongside the work of Andrew Spicer (2001) on masculinity in British film in the post-war period.

Bell's revisionism sets out to dispel the myth that 1950s British cinema was complacent and conservative in its depiction of women, that it acted simply to reflect the widely held assumption of the decade as one of gender conformity and feminist failure. Accordingly, she offers 'the first sustained examination of cinematic femininities in British popular film that is driven by an understanding of the period as one of instability and change rather than gender conservatism and the ready acceptance of normative femininity' (p. 4). The study, which encompasses the post-war years from 1945, interrogates a selection of narrative figures and generic groupings to reveal women's changing experiences and subjectivities as they were articulated on the screen. In marginal genres like science fiction, and in transgressive characters like the *femme fatale* and the prostitute, Bell finds ambiguous exceptions to the preferred femininity of the time, exemplified in the construct of the 'happy housewife' ensconced within the 'companionate marriage'. A number of now largely forgotten films like *The perfect woman* (1949), *Stolen face* (1952) and *Four sided triangle* (1953) focus on men attempting to reproduce women through scientific means, and while these clearly express a patriarchal fantasy regarding the 'ideal woman', Bell also finds in these productions a prominent sense of anxiety, revealing the uncertainty in men regarding post-war gender roles. With the British *femme fatale* the domestic cinema is seen to engage with the possibilities and anxieties readily associated with female agency. In films such as *Easy money* (1948), *Dear murderer* (1947) and *Daybreak* (1946), Bell identifies a 'particularly British inflection of female sexuality', and brings new thinking and fresh perspectives on how female choice was expressed in the cycles of melodramas and crime films prevalent in the immediate post-war years (p. 46). In the later 1950s, British cinema found the figure of the prostitute similarly ambiguous, the character embodying divergent concerns regarding femininity at a time of rapid social change, and a 'site where concerns, anxieties and new understandings of female sexuality were being worked through in a manner palatable to audiences' (p. 147). *The flesh is weak* (1957) and *Passport to shame* (1959) are given close attention in the context of the ruminations of the recent Wolfenden Report (1957), which channelled official attention on the social problem of prostitution.

Throughout the 1950s comedy vied with the war film as the most popular genre of the decade and Bell argues the significance of the 'Comedy-of-Marriage' film for its revelations about matrimony and the domestic realm. It was a distinctive genre in that it allowed some space for female creative agency. Directors Wendy Toye and Muriel Box, and screenwriter Anne Burnaby, were able, in such films as *Raising a riot* (1955),

*To Dorothy a son* (1954) and *Young wives' tale* (1951), to engage with sexual politics in a way denied elsewhere in the national cinema and to find expression for the desire that the feminine be recognised and respected. In the final chapter of the book, Bell extends this view to female film critics who occupied a prominent place in the profession. Doyen figures like Dilys Powell and Caroline Lejeune were joined by new writers such as Catherine de la Roche and E. Arnot Robertson and this preliminary survey is a timely reminder that British film scholarship urgently needs to pay attention to the profession of film criticism.

The female group film, interestingly a type more common in British cinema than in Hollywood, is offered as a revealing contrast to official discourses in the 1950s which addressed women as wives and mothers, 'positioning them in relation to husbands within a companionate marriage that ostensibly allowed little space for female friendships to flourish' (p. 98). Significantly, this variant of the woman's film acted as the counterpart to the popular male-orientated war film, and was present in genres as varied as comedy, war and the social problem film. It can be appreciated as the antithesis to the ideal of the companionate marriage and the belief that women and men's most significant relationships were with each other and within marriage.

In conformity with much British film scholarship, *Femininity in the frame* adopts a social historical approach to its novel subject, discussing its selected films squarely within the empirical framework of social reports and enquiries, recent work on British cinema, and some of the more important studies of sex, gender and representation. In conclusion, Bell contends that British cinema's dealing with femininity in the 1950s was frequently 'surprising', and the joy of surprise is effectively communicated by the book.

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Spicer, A., 2001. *Typical men: the representation of masculinity in popular British cinema*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

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© 2010, Alan Burton

## The sympathetic medium: feminine channeling, the occult, and communication technologies, 1859–1919

JILL GALVAN, 2010

New York: Cornell University Press

216 pp., ISBN 978 0 8014 4801 0, £27.95 (hardback)

In 1848, Margaret and Kate Fox, two adolescents from Hydesville in the US, convinced their parents and neighbours that they could communicate with spirits who answered by a series of disembodied knocks. The cultural after-effect of the Fox sisters was to be widespread and in this respect, the period of study outlined in this book's title, 1859–1919, is critical. This volume examines how 'the development of female mediumship parallels women's increasing involvement over the course of the period in technological modes of communication mediation' (p. 4). Central to this issue are the depictions of women in a rapidly expanding industry that chose to employ them as mediators for the various transmissions (telegrams, typing, and later telephoning). Women engaged in such operations are represented in terms that are strongly analogous to forms of occult mediumship.

Chapter 1 describes how the popular nineteenth-century perception of women as sympathetic and empathic towards the needs of others was read into occupations such as the telegraph girl or telephone receptionist so that mediation in the process of communication between two individuals was effectively gendered feminine. The sensitive woman is read as being able to merge not only with a customer's needs but also with the technology itself, 'as if her body were inseparable from the information she transmits' (p. 55). Henry James' *In the cage* (1898) is central to this discussion, revealing the complicated interaction between class, sexuality and the desire to be included in the private lives of those whose messages the protagonist transfers. *In the cage* also offers an insight into the importance of the mediating woman within the context of the occult and gothic, with James positing 'analogies between telegraphic and occult communications' (p. 36). Jill Galvan cleverly reads these analogies as evidencing a 'subtle twist' to interpretations of James' occult influence.

In Chapter 2 the female mediator is the focus for occult assault. In *Dracula* (1897), Mina Harker embodies the two key aspects of sensitivity and automatism, the mechanical, unthinking response to her work as she mediates and translates Van Helsing's associates' records. This psychological state makes her vulnerable to Dracula's psychic domination. Galvan locates Mina at the centre of a 'war of culturally disparate means of communication' (p. 72). This struggle pits modern communication technologies, typing, shorthand, phonograph and the telegram, against the vampire's telepathic control of Mina, who becomes a threat to and a source of information for both Dracula and his opponents.

George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) engages with artistic production and its influence upon a mass audience. Despite possessing little musical talent, Trilby is transformed into 'a veritable phonograph' capable of recording and repeating Svengali's instruction (p. 100). Here a close relationship between the occult and modern technology is established. In Chapter 3 emphasis is laid upon the late nineteenth-century sense of the unknown potential of the unconscious mind, 'its capacity to channel strange and wonderful communications' (p. 134). Trilby represents the female mediator both as an occult Figure (similar to Mina) and a technological information system, expressing uncertainty at the advent of modern communication technologies, a time when such items 'easily yoked to interests in the occult' (p. 117).

Chapter 4 examines how the figure of the female typist transforms from 'secretarial unmindfulness', the passive, receptive and automatic response of the girl employed in the telecommunication industry, into an autonomous figure that utilises her role as a deliberate pretence in order to become a detective. In Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong poison* (1930), Katherine Climpson incorporates the role of a secretary as part of an elaborate 'feminine distraction' (p. 145) that is closely connected to the supernatural. In order to track down a missing will she ingratiates herself into the company of spiritualists by feigning mediumistic talent as an automatic writer mediating between the spirits of the dead and the living.

In the final chapter, Robert Browning's poem 'Sludge the medium' is read as revealing not only how 'the medium's instrumentality and self-suppression came to be associated with the feminine' (p. 164) but also how this cultural perception affected male mediums, in particular the intended target of Browning's sarcasm, Daniel Douglas Home. The unreliability of the poem's narrative is conflated with the unpredictability of Sludge/Home's character, revealing key complexities within 'the process of poetic mediumship' (p. 182) that are connected to earlier themes of textual unreliability in elements of the communication network.

The book concludes by considering how female mediation in communication technology is portrayed on television and modern cinema, suggesting that at the heart of such systems the sensitive mediatory element will probably be the empathic woman. This emphasis

upon non-literary forms of late twentieth-century entertainment is a stimulating way of highlighting this volume's central point of the relevance of the mediating woman. It is a wide-ranging historical and cultural analysis of a key period for spiritual and technological forms of communication.

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**Ink-stained amazons and cinematic warriors: superwomen in modern mythology**

JENNIFER K. STULLER, 2010

New York: I.B. Tauris

239 pp., ISBN 978-1-84511-965-2, £10 (paperback)

Strong, heroic, ass-kicking women in popular culture have a long and contestable history. Their abilities and their independence challenge conventional assumptions about gender roles, but their sexualization and various narrative problems often diminish the progressive, and indeed feminist, possibilities these superwomen present. In *Ink-stained amazons and cinematic warriors*, Jennifer K. Stuller provides a fond and well-written overview of some of the most influential action heroines of the past 40 years. The impetus for Stuller's book is a laudable concern about the dearth of heroic female role models in our modern myths. 'We want to believe we are capable of phenomenal acts', writes Stuller, 'and we need stories to teach us that, indeed, no matter our gender, race, sexual preference, or physical challenges, we can be heroes' (p. 4). Thus Stuller goes on to convincingly argue that superwomen have existed in the media with various degrees of popularity since the 1960s and 1970s, and continue to circulate today in a manner that allows them to address different themes and social issues from their male counterparts. These superwomen may be fewer in number and more eroticized than the men, and they are more likely to be misunderstood or dismissed, but when they are at their best these modern female warriors speak volumes about new heroic possibilities for women (both the fictional characters and the women who consume them).

*Ink-stained amazons and cinematic warriors* is in three sections. The third section, although notably smaller, is essentially a single (but important) chapter discussing the influence of several women who have become producers of contemporary superwomen stories written with the explicit purpose of creating positive female characters. The first, 'Standing on the Shoulders of Amazons', is made up of four chapters that chronicle the development of fictional superwomen, from the inception of Wonder Woman in the comic books of the 1940s through to the Riot Grrrl and third-wave feminist-influenced heroines of the 1990s and 2000s. Stuller has an obvious affection for the heroines of her youth and includes anecdotes about her own feelings of empowerment while watching women like Linda Carter as the titular heroine of the 1970s television version of *Wonder woman*. Stuller's personal memories, like those of thousands of other women, help personalize the positive influence which programs like *The bionic woman*, *Police woman*, *The avengers*, and *Charlie's angels* had on a generation of emerging feminists. This section also chronicles the changes heroines went through during the muscle-bound, Schwarzenegger/Stallone-dominated Reagan era of cinema and how characters like Ellen Ripley of *Aliens* and Sarah Connor of *Terminator 2*, and the lesser written-about *Red Sonja*, balanced womanhood and hardbodied action aesthetics. And Stuller concludes her

historical overview with an analysis of several key 1990s television programs such as *Aeon flux*, *Xena: warrior princess*, and *Buffy the vampire slayer*. Central to her discussion here, and her later more thematically organized chapters, is how these more modern superwomen reflect and embody third-wave feminist beliefs in postmodern pastiche, an embrace of popular culture, and that women can and should have it all – gender equality without giving up other interests that have previously been derided as too girly.

The second section, ‘Journey of the Female Hero’, makes the strongest and most interesting contribution to the growing body of literature about superwomen in popular culture. Where the first section is a standard historical primer that covers terrain very familiar to anyone with an interest in the topic, the three chapters that constitute the second section provide some very keen insights into these heroines as their mythologies intersect with issues of love as a guiding ideology, and of fathers, and mothers respectively. At times, Stuller’s emphasis on a select few favorite characters (Wonder Woman, Xena, Buffy, Max of *Dark angel*, Sydney Bristow of *Alias*, and Veronica Mars of her self-titled program) seems a bit limiting, but she does construct clear and convincing arguments. Her analysis of the feminist impulses underlying the female warriors’ emphasis on loving alliances and her belief in redemption provides a welcome contrast to the typical male-dominated formula. Likewise, Stuller’s separate discussions of the heroines’ ideological relationships with their (typically single) fathers, and their often problematic association with maternity, opens the door to further work on these important but mostly overlooked narrative conventions.

As someone who has taught and written about action heroines for years I found *Ink-stained amazons and cinematic warriors* to be a welcome addition to the field. The book is written in an accessible and personalized journalistic style of the sort employed in mass-market feminist magazines like *Bust* and *Bitch* (both of which are cited often in the text). This observation is not meant as a criticism but as a compliment. Rather than speaking only to graduate students and professional academics, Stuller’s volume is well situated to speak to general readers and would be a very effective primer for undergraduate students of gender and media studies.

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**Women constructing men: female novelists and their male characters, 1750–2000**

SARAH S.G. FRANTZ and KATHARINA RENNHAK, eds, 2010

Plymouth, MA: Lexington Books

173 pp., ISBN 978 0 7391 3365 1, £44.95 (hardback)

The aim of the essays (14 of them) in this book is to fill in the gap in literary studies caused by ‘the incomplete convergence of the critical inquiry of women’s studies and masculinity studies’. How women describe fathers, lovers, brothers, sons, etc. ‘exposes different but equally vital and telling perspectives of the construction of gender from that revealed by similar consideration of their female characters’ (p. 3). Using this broad and unchallenging definition, *Women constructing men* ranges over centuries and countries to give a selection, from Sarah Scott, writing in England in the mid-1770s, to Native American author Louise Erdrich writing at the end of the last century. On the way obvious candidates like Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf are scooped up but also less well-known writers like Anne Plumtre, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Carol

Shields. Even with the well-known writers, less famous examples of their work are chosen, so that Charlotte Brontë's *The professor* and George Eliot's *The lifted veil* are discussed.

The discussion of *The lifted veil*, interesting as far as it goes, fails to consider why Eliot chose to use a male character for her sole first-person narrator. Latimer's clairvoyant abilities, which resemble the novelist's powers of seeing into her characters' minds, is 'an archetype of narcissistic self-obsession' (p. 115) and as such is worth seeing in the context of a reaction to all the noble, if flawed, men in her other novels, such as Adam Bede, Daniel Deronda and even Tertius Lydgate. Perhaps the same reasons that caused Eliot to choose a male *nom de plume* also caused her to express her authorial self-doubts and her dislike of the male-dominated literary world in this guise.

Virginia Richter's chapter on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* takes a sophisticated view of Woolf's predicament in conceptualising gender as performative and as 'real'. Is Orlando the sum of his clothes or are there biological and cultural reasons which limit if not prohibit her freedom to choose? In novels earlier than *Orlando* Woolf had explored fixed gender roles: men like the rigid Dr Bradshaw in *Mrs Dalloway* or the buttoned-up Richard Dalloway, and women like the feminine Clarissa or the motherly Mrs Ramsay. In *Orlando* the sympathy Woolf had long shown to characters whose identity is indeterminate, from whatever cause, like the shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith, grows into fully embodied ambivalence in the figure of Orlando, which entails a consideration of the relation between sex and gender. There are three models: 'the constructivist, the essentialist, and the mixed'. The result in *Orlando*, Richter argues, is 'an indeterminate movement between and combination of the choices offered by femininity, masculinity, and androgyny' (p. 168).

Katherine Bode argues that women writers have rarely depicted and explored men's bodies, and the assumption is that vision, the gaze, is typically a male prerogative. But three contemporary fictions by Australian women illustrate what Bode calls a paradigm shift in this attitude in that they foreground men's bodies, which are 'explicitly portrayed in terms of objectification' (p. 185). Bode reverses Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (1975) to discuss the way in which women depict eroticised or damaged male bodies. In Wendy Scarfe's *Miranda*, for example, the female protagonist finds a wounded young man and develops her artistic powers out of her fetishistic and sadistic obsession with his body, an obsession which verges on madness. Bode's contention is that these novels indicate that such representation of men's bodies is increasing and that it is socially acceptable. Perhaps so, but only in Western society. In large areas of the world, women gazing at men's bodies in public is strictly taboo.

It's a long way from the vampirish *Miranda* back to Fanny Burney's heroine in *The wanderer*, a poor and apparently friendless girl who eventually gets her man and his fortune. But it is at a cost and in her defenceless state, '[n]o male character can avoid partaking of masculine privilege in these circumstances' (p. 42). Her only safeguard is the utmost propriety; only this can protect her from what seems, even in her eventual husband, to be a fair degree of caddishness. Jane Austen's cads are, by contrast, subtler creatures. Willoughby in *Sense and sensibility* asks Elinor, 'Do you think me most a knave or a fool?' and the question, as Sarah Ailwood suggests, remains unanswered. Does the blame lie 'in the man himself or in the society that conditioned him?' (p. 72)? Jane Fairfax in *Emma* risks a similar fate to Marianne's, but her man is rescued from caddishness by death (his aunt's) and the love of a good woman who puts up with his deceits and his flirtations with other women. As for Mr Knightly, who can imagine being in bed with him? Well, actually . . .

This enjoyable collection of essays, if mixed in both quality and approach to the subject, sets one thinking along such visionary lines.

**Reference**

Mulvey, L., 1975. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16 (3) (Autumn), 6–18.

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**Feminism and contemporary Indian women's writing**

ELIZABETH JACKSON, 2010

London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan

200 pp., ISBN 9780230236271, £50.00 (hardback)

Contemporary Indian women's writing has already received a generous amount of attention from feminist critics. Elizabeth Jackson's book is yet another similarly encouraging study focusing on the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. In her introduction, Jackson follows other critics and historians in linking the national struggle with the growth of the women's movement in India. However, as she points out, 'one of the main *justifications* for British rule in India was the argument that Indian women required the protection and intervention of the colonial state' (p. 4). In the 1930s and 1940s, as the struggle for freedom gained momentum, Indian women also became increasingly conscious of their rights and status. Gandhi's call for *swaraj* (self-rule) led to a call for women's emancipation. It is interesting to note that women came out in large numbers to support the national movement and became a part of the political struggle. The Post-Independence era, on the other hand, has been regarded as a more paradoxical period, with a clear focus on women's issues while at the same time the atrocities committed to them have been on the rise.

A central objective of this study is the critical examination of the concept of the family within society. Marriage and motherhood have long been the major areas of concern in women's lives. The women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande are caught in marital crises and wifehood is more of a 'habit' than a 'feeling' (p. 79). Likewise, sexual repression and gender oppression are closely linked. Jackson rightly highlights the boredom of married life in several examples of Deshpande's novels. Female infanticide, dowry deaths, infidelity in marriage, domestic violence, rape both in and outside marriage, *sati*, unequal marriages, the preference of the male child over the female child, *purdah*, the lack of education and a vocation are some of the problems examined by the four writers. Moreover, Indian women not only face discrimination on account of their sex, but also face injustice on the grounds of caste, class, race and culture. Each of the women writers discussed in this book has written extensively about women's quest for identity, highlighting 'women's role in maintaining and/or resisting patriarchy' (p. 11).

It is significant that individual chapters are divided thematically. Indeed, the chapters in the book neatly exemplify the challenges within the orthodox Indian tradition. Marriage, sexuality and motherhood have been discussed along with women's cultural identity and social class in the fictional works of the women novelists. For instance, in her study on Kamala Markandaya, Jackson identifies the East–West encounter as a major theme, as well as racial discrimination, economic oppression and social injustice. Jackson argues that '... Markandaya's earlier "heroines" are heroic mainly because of their nurturing qualities' (p. 93). While they submit to masculine authority, later characters like Saroja in

*Two virgins* (1973) and Mohini in *The golden honeycomb* (1977) are more aware and better equipped to question and subvert patriarchal intrusion.

In her interpretation of Nayantara Sahgal's work Jackson highlights that she supports 'sexual freedom for women as well as men', seeing the exploitation of women as 'primarily sexual rather than economic' (p. 67). The women in her later novels seek alternatives outside marriage, whether it is Rose in *Rich like us* (1985) who, despite being an outsider, speaks on behalf of the weak and impoverished. Nevertheless, Jackson emphasizes that Sahgal retains the common dependence syndrome whereby 'malevolent male domination is simply replaced by benevolent male domination' (p. 123).

I was more keen to read her analysis of Anita Desai. Most of Desai's female characters are in constant search for a deeper sense of fulfillment to add a certain meaning to their lives. Their ennui and a state of alienation are equally responsible for their dissatisfaction, as is a lack of vocation. Maya in *Cry the peacock* (1963) is one such woman trapped in her own subjectivity. Unable to escape her situation, she lapses into madness after killing her husband. Sita in *Where shall we go this summer?* (1975) suffers from a similar sense of ignominy. She too is bored of her life in the city and moves away to an island. However, she eventually accepts life and returns to Bombay to fulfill her responsibilities towards her husband, her children and the unborn child. Jackson asserts (it has been said with equal conviction by other critics in the past) that – 'her maternal role – turns out to be her salvation' (p. 99). Desai challenges the assumption that motherhood and nurturing are natural instincts in women. There is little on Desai that has not been critiqued at length earlier. We all know that in *Clear light of day* (1980) Bim escapes the heterosexual plot by refusing marriage and maternity but looks after the everlasting baby in Baba. The last chapter of the book focuses on the form and narrative strategy and its close association with feminism in the Indian context.

All four novelists write and reinforce multiple perspectives in varying degrees. If Markandaya is conventional in her narrative approach and is termed 'realist', Sahgal is inclined towards 'critical realism' (p. 173), with an aim to connect the public and the private realm. If Anita Desai probes the inner psyche of her characters through landscape, dreams, symbols, memories, and fantasies, Deshpande is read 'as the most overtly and self-consciously feminist of the four authors' (p. 172). Both Desai and Deshpande use 'subjective realism' to indict the family as a first major site of female subjugation.

A significant feature that makes this book commendable is its attempt to articulate the diverse experiences, resolutions and contradictions that determine women's role within patriarchy. The battle for Indian feminism is 'neither homogeneous nor monolithic' (p. 7), it is rooted in diverse cultures, circumscribed by traditions and authorities which are essentially phallogocentric. It would be far more interesting if the book had a firm theoretical grounding which could have allowed Jackson a deeper engagement with the feminist concerns. I also missed Jackson's analysis of some of Desai and Deshpande's earlier novels, such as *Journey to Ithaca* (1996) and *Moving on* (2004), where women not only serve as agents of change but recognize and seek to transform their lives and the community at large. This trajectory from the voyage in to the voyage out, a shift from the intensely private world of silence and submission to the public sphere of speech and writing, a career and a vocation and a serious shift towards spiritual emancipation, is one worth exploring in detail and would certainly add substance to the world of women in contemporary Indian women's writing. Not to move away, but to move on should be our next concern.

**In the frame: women's ekphrastic poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler**

JANE HEDLEY, NICK HALPERN and WILLARD SPIEGELMAN, eds, 2009

Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press

316 pp., ISBN 978-0874130461, £53.50 (hardback)

Poems depicting works of visual art – or ekphrastic poems as they are usually called – are an increasingly popular genre. Yet do women write a different kind of ekphrastic poem than men? This simple but significant question is what Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern and Willard Spiegelman seek to answer in their edited collection *In the frame: women's ekphrastic poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*. They invited a stellar cast of contemporary ekphrastic poets (Rachel Hadas and Karl Kirchwey) and leading poetry critics to help them out. Even though some of the most well-known and respected female poets, including Marianne Moore, Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Rita Dove, and Jorie Graham, have tried their hand at ekphrastic poetry, this most aesthetic of poetic genres is traditionally considered to be dominated by men. As Jane Hedley points out in the introduction, this misconception is largely due to Laura Mulvey's still popular concept of the male gaze as formulated in her essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (1975). The classical but also stereotypical ekphrastic poem is after all of a male poet interpreting the work of a male painter scrutinizing a female figure.

Female poets inherited this tradition, as all contributors to *In the frame* agree, but they usually found ways around or beyond the male gaze, and employed many different methods to avoid staring with forceful, possessive eyes. They may experiment with different modes of address or write in sequences rather than in hermetic, New Critical lyrics, as Barbara Fischer notes about poets Anne Carson, Kathleen Fraser and Cole Swensen. Marianne Moore, a founding mother of female ekphrastic poetry, does not stare either; she glances at visual objects, as Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux shows perceptively in one of the most impressive contributions to this edited volume. Often Moore will look askance at a great many images rather than gawk at one in particular. While Moore loved museum art, she often focused her attention on more mundane or overlooked objects as well: 'plates, bottles, tapestries, embroideries' (p. 127). Bishop did the same. Her unpretentiously titled 'Poem' about a tiny painting – or rather sketch – by a male ancestor features in several chapters of *In the frame*, and it appears to occupy a vital place in the gallery of female ekphrasis.

Whereas male poets, such as W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell and William Carlos Williams may stare at Old Masters, female poets tend to offer more surprising angles at more ungainly or ignored sites and sights. 'The old masters, the old sources / haven't a clue what we're about / shivering here in the half-dark "sixties"', Adrienne Rich wrote iconoclastically in 'In the evening' in 1969, referring as much to the Rembrandts and Vermeers as to the Audens and Lowells. Rich is one of the few women who consciously appropriated a male-type gaze in her ekphrastic poetry; to expose patriarchy, but also to try to transfix women into the limelight – as again Loizeaux points out – in an effort to empower them after so many years of neglect. Loizeaux, whose book *Twentieth-century poetry and visual arts* (2008) was also recently published, is particularly convincing in showing how ekphrastic poetry is an essential but still not fully understood part of Rich's 're-vision' of gender relations in the post-war era. If female poets do look at paintings by Old Masters, it is usually at the lesser-known ones, for instance Nicolaes Maes' *Young girl peeling apples* (c. 1655), as Mary Jo Salter does in her eponymous poem. Whereas Rich calls the contemporary relevance of the Old Masters into question, Salter praises Rembrandt's little-known student, but also his nameless female sitter who is likewise an artist of sorts, creating a gorgeous 'red peel of ribbon' out of a mundane apple (1991, 2009).

None of the authors are essentialist in their views, however. They agree that there is not one female ekphrastic tradition or mode of writing, but rather many strands that might point towards a female ekphrastic poetics. While the editors may have aimed to define such a female mode of writing, their authors present such variegated approaches by such a wide array of female poets that this goal is ultimately not attained in this edited volume. When they asked their ostensibly simple question about what a female ekphrastic poem looks like, the editors got more than they bargained for. Ironically, female ekphrastic poetry is such a rich subject that one edited volume is clearly not enough to cover the entire spectrum of practitioners and their many techniques and methods. Still, while evoking this embarrassment of riches, *In the frame* is not an eclectic volume. The editors and authors have carefully studied each others' chapters and are all keenly aware of what earlier theorists of ekphrastic poets, such as Paul H. Fry, James Heffernan and W.J.T. Mitchell – the first being also one of the authors – have claimed. This makes *In the frame* a highly informative and intelligent discussion by poets and critics who all stare at the same wondrous sight that is female ekphrastic poetry.

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## Riding the black ram: law, literature and gender

SUSAN SAGE HEINZELMAN, 2010

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The narratives of law and literature share many conventions, norms that are both historical and gender-specific, and it is the aim of this book to reveal these and to undermine their appearance of universality. The central thesis is an amendment to Robert Cover's canonical 1983 essay 'Foreword: *nomos* and narrative' which identifies the normative force of history as the dual influences of law and communal narratives. Heinzelman argues that this *nomos* is only the masculine contribution, and puts forward a claim for the supplementary 'world-creating' abilities of the female *nostos*, which 'finds frequent expression through the bodies of women' and is 'always on the verge of disrupting the narratives generated by *nomos*' (pp. xv, xiii). The 'riding the black ram' of the title is the trope used to metaphorically figure this potentially disruptive force; *possibly* a literal manorial court ritual, a submission required of unruly widows wishing to retain their lands.

The book then sets out to offer a new way of reading the familiar which cuts across the binary of 'powerful' and 'powerless' (pp. xiii, xv), altering, it is claimed, a paradigm which 'still dominates feminist critical theory' (p. xv). In so far as the paradigm has already been well shifted by numerous scholars, deconstructing, for instance, notions of public and

private and questioning the idea of a separation of spheres, it is more helpful to say that it contributes a fresh perspective to the general endeavour.

The book covers a variety of legal and literary narratives chronologically illustrating the 'strategic management of the figure of the unruly woman' (p. xiv), some historical, some fictional, written by both men and women. The potential for ideological intervention inherent in different genres, particularly romance, is an ongoing thread. For instance, a well-wrought analysis of two *Canterbury tales* pits Chaucer's Man of Law against his Wife of Bath, her subversive use of romance ingredients against his normative manipulation. The matriarch finesses a solution to a rape trial based on mutual wish-fulfilment, the lawyer a legitimisation of masculine-centred regulation of desire.

The chapter, 'Public affairs and juridical intimacies', discusses examples of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century romance narratives blending political and amorous intrigue. This is a largely convincing and engaging chapter, adding to the existing store of good arguments for appreciating the kind of cultural perspective which Aphra Behn's 1696 *Oroonoko* shares with French women *romanciers*. Their stories figure a politics shaped by the private relationships of the protagonists in an 'intimate public sphere' (p. 35). Conceived as a kind of political utterance, they nevertheless struggled to be taken seriously within the normative literary culture which was beginning to favour the early realist novel with its didactic agenda and pseudo-forensic judging of character.

Another strand of that argument is developed in the next chapter, 'Black letters and black rams'. The male-authored *Treatise for feme covertes* (1732) is presented as an example of a trend favouring official law over more flexible custom, a strategy of institutionalisation perhaps akin to genre-policing the novel. Delarivier Manley's 1714 *Rivella*, a fictional, autobiographical exploration of a lawsuit, is discussed as resistance to the tide, claiming legal (and cultural) authority for romance. This chapter is less successful, largely because its claim to '(trace) coeval changes in legal and literary representations of the widow in Britain' (p. 48) is dispatched too briskly.

The chapter on Mary Blandy's 1752 trial for parricide focuses on strategies used to narrate 'truth'. Analysing Fielding's version in *Examples of the interposition of providence in the detection and punishment of murder*, Heinzelman shows how he acquires authority by aligning himself with legal, philosophical, scientific or theological forms. She argues that Blandy's own account conversely damaged her credibility because it 'aligns itself rhetorically and formally with the sentimental novel' (p. 90). This is an interesting juxtaposition, but her analysis disappointingly provides no evidence of Blandy's actual words.

The final chapter on the Caroline Brunswick adultery trial is a useful mapping of contemporary representations, including a satirical cartoon of the Queen riding that black ram into a rapturously supportive court. The cultural and political significance of the royal scandal, in which Caroline was variously cast as defiler of the monarchy or potential saviour of the people, is pointed by literary analysis of two comparably-tried queens in Shakespeare. The trial of Hermione in *The winter's tale* is therefore historicised as a topical examination of the destructive effects of a monarch's absolutism and his need to reanimate the bond with his subjects. Shakespeare makes a woman's intervention provide the political means. This chapter could stand metonymically for the book's project, that is, to historicise fertile intersections between law and literature so as to foreground the 'significance of sexuality and gender in the way we narrate our world' (p. 119).

It may be that after returning to empirical investigation of the texts you will want to argue with some of the analysis, or that you will want to argue with some of the book's ontological contentions, but it is undoubtedly a stimulating project that repays close

attention. Moreover, an engaging network of connections to related concepts in the work of other interdisciplinary theorists is usefully threaded through it.

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