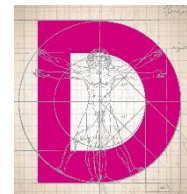


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BOOK REVIEW: MUJER Y ENTRETENIMIENTO EN EL HOGAR VICTORIANO

RESEÑA DE LIBRO: MUJER Y ENTRETENIMIENTO EN EL HOGAR VICTORIANO

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Mujer y entretenimiento en el hogar victoriano, by Laura Monrós-Gaspar and Rosario Arias Doblas, is a book published by the University of València in 2023. Both authors are well-regarded academics, as well as full professors of English Philology. The book was part of the project *Women entrepreneurs and theatrical culture in Great Britain 1800s-present* (AICO/2021/225).

The book is engaging, and its subject matter allows the authors to explore various complex realities of this era. The innovation in focusing in the space of the Victorian home, more specifically the living room and drawing room not as the epitome of the domestic sphere, but as a space where both the public and the domestic converge and the symbolic meaning of the spheres, the spaces and their inhabitants is renegotiated, as is their relationship to one another, is rather effective. Thus, focusing on this room—from its appearance to its portrayal to the activities celebrated therein—is an inspired choice to anchor the reader in a physical environment where these ambiguities (even in an era that so loathed them) were naturally present.

The reading experience is smooth: the style and rhythm is agile, the prose is clear and each sentence is full of information. Examples appear often, and they are helpful and pertinent. We may see through the book references to both literature and press from the era, as well as current academic writing. The richness in sources is notable, even with the academic expertise of the authors. There is a clear feminist perspective, given that the book is, at least partially about Victorian gender roles. The sections of the book deal with diverse cultural manifestations where the Domestic and the Public areas of Victorian lives overlap, showing an interesting subject from varied perspectives and through diverse manifestations.

The first section, dealing with materiality and craftsmanship in the Victorian household, overviews a subject (physical objects and how culture manifests in them) notable for its depth and inescapability in any culture, but of particular relevance in the context of 19th century England, especially with colonization, industrialization and a growing middle class. Beginning with interior design and its inception as a discipline, it then delves into craftsmanship, the rise and influence of the Arts and Crafts movement and the importance of objects for the Victorians, which segues rather naturally into the next subject of souvenirs and keepsakes (their cultural importance is also related to the spiritualism of this era, which is later mentioned in a later chapter dealing with spiritism).

This first part is followed by a section focused on two creative figures: Jane Austen and Rosina Filippi. Austen is a well-known novelist, and Filippi, an accomplished, multifaceted artist living in late Victorian times, was the first to adapt her work into the stage. Part of this section is focused on Filippi's trajectory, offering not only a glimpse of her social and professional circle, with connections to well-regarded figures such as George Bernard Shaw, but an insight into how her stage adaptations of Austen's work, 'intended for Drawing Room performance', in her words, subvert the privacy of the drawing room.

Spiritism and séances are the next subject broached by the authors, as an unconventional, if empowering, way for women to gain relevance and control of social gatherings which were not only in the liminal space between the public and private and, but aimed for the liminality between the living and the dead.

The last section deals with the Somerville Club, one of the clubs for women in London, active from 1878 to 1908. This is also one of the most unique contributions of the book, since there had never been such a detailed academic analysis of this specific club. It presents the club as a well-regarded institution, where women of different classes could enjoy the benefits of a well-situated space that also toed the line between a public and private meeting place. With debates and conferences, courses and performances, clubs —and their drawing rooms— were places where women could freely discuss matters of relevance often thought, in the era, to be best left to men. The Somerville club, with its ethos of only accepting members who were in favour of the Women's Rights, was susceptible to having its members portrayed negatively as the archetypal and then-detested New Woman (with her emasculating independence and bothersome outspokenness).

Like with the aforementioned Filippi, this section showcases how ambitious and intellectual women endeavoured in their craft and partook in academic, experimental and public circles, with many of them, despite not garnering the attention or public relevance of their male counterparts, being at the forefront of debates, discussions and discourses that were most relevant for the era. This last section in particular also mentions women who were successful in academic or professional settings, being able to lead by example in an era with such restrictive gender roles.

Like most analyses of restrictive Victorian societal rules, the great majority of the social, cultural and economic context is about the upper and middle class. The Victorian home mentioned in the title is that of an upper or middle class woman, and in some occasions, differences between upper and middle classes are mentioned, such as when talking about jewellery (51; ch. 2, sec. 1). Bearing in mind the abysmal difference in the houses inhabited by urban working families and those owned by urban upper and middle classes (since the middle class imitated Queen Victoria and the upper class), this was a necessary choice in order to be able to examine every subject in these more similar spaces (working-class houses would rarely, if ever, have a drawing room). However, working-class women are rather relevant in the Somerville Club chapter, where they were part of its success from its inception.

Overall, the book is a well-researched, fruitful and interesting read. Every section has a thousand compelling stories. In the epilogue and prologue it mentions areas of research that may also be explored: travelling women, sick rooms, gardenscaping... The only problem with exploring a concept from such different angles is how eventually the reader's curiosity may compel them to keep wanting to read about subjects and angles the book has already deemed exhausted. The main problem of the book is how the reader may wish for the subjects to be explored further, and for the chapters to be longer. Nonetheless, one could argue that this only means that the subjects are interesting. Is closing a book wanting more actually a bad thing?