



Gender & Victorian Reform

Anita Rose

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Gender, in the nineteenth century as now, is an integral part of identity. As a result, gender, along with race and class, has long been a vital part of public discourse about social concerns and reform. The fourteen essays in 'Gender and Victorian Reform' address the overt and subtle ways in which gender influenced social reform in Victorian England. In addition to investigating the more readily apparent instances of gender in the areas of suffrage, women's education, and marriage law reform, the contributors to this collection examine the structure of charitable organizations, the interpretation of language and literacy, ideas of beauty, and religion through the lens of gender and offer diverse approaches to Victorian literature and culture. Some examine specific texts or single canonical authors, others introduce the reader to little-known authors and texts, and still others focus on the culture of reform rather than specific literary texts. Essays are arranged into four parts, with Part I focusing on historical context and a revisioning of the historical romance. Part II addresses more specifically the role of women in public life and in the professions. The essays in Part III look even more specifically at the connections among reform, gender, literacy and literary genre in Eliot, Collins, and Gaskell. The final four essays offer readings of the impact of gender ideology on beauty, dress, politics and religion. Taken as a whole, the essays in this collection present a serious consideration of the role of gender in art and in public life that spans the Victorian era. Reformist impulses are revealed in a number of Victorian texts that are not generally read as overtly political. In this way, this collection thoughtfully focuses on the influence of gender on a wide range of social movements, and moves the significance of gender beyond simply the content of Victorian fiction and the identity of the authors and into the more fundamental connection of discourse to reform.

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