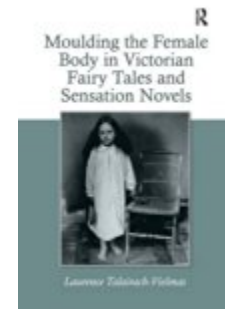


Laurence Talairach-Vielmas. *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*. London: Ashgate, 2007. 188 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-6034-7.

Reviewed by Carrie Wasinger

Published on H-Childhood (November, 2009)

Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan



Taking Children's Stories Seriously

For some time now, the problem for scholars of children's literature has been how to present serious scholarly investigations of what must be one of the broadest and most-read genres to an intellectual community that largely scoffs at the subject and relegates discussion of it to education journals and undergraduate applied technique classes. One response by those seeking to publish in mainstream journals and academic presses has been to couple children's literature with more canonical "adult" fare, thus imparting through proximity the seriousness that children's literature is said to lack. This strategy has worked to various degrees in several cases; it has also, unfortunately, led to some fearfully awkward books.

In *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas attempts to yoke Victorian children's literature to Victorian sensation fiction through a thematic study of women's experience and women's bodies. For Talairach-Vielmas, the clash between realism and fantasy in sensation fiction and works for children helped writers to explore the constraints Victorians imposed on the female body. According to Talairach-Vielmas, a variety of works present heroines with elastic and adaptable bodies and in this way both deconstruct and reconstruct Victorian expectations of femininity. Thus burgeoning capitalism held the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House "poised over contradictory discourses" (p. 5) where "feminine representation, caught within a commodity culture saturated with advertisements and dominated by representation, transform[ed] feminine identity into a literary exhibit where

the woman's body [was] only figured in sets of similes" (p. 6). What women do with these similes—whether they take them as fetters or tools—forms the central object of the study's investigation.

To that end, *Moulding the Female Body* is comprised of two distinct parts: the first half studies children's literature and the second half chronicles Victorian sensation fiction. Talairach-Vielmas links these two genres through that ever-elusive word, "fantasy," which, unfortunately, proves a frail bond. Despite valiant effort, *Moulding the Female Body's* two halves never quite coalesce into a synthetic whole, and although her readings are intriguing and cogent, Talairach-Vielmas's style is often dense and elliptical. Nevertheless, in its individual parts, *Moulding the Female Body* has much to offer.

The first four chapters are given over to some of the most well-known and beloved Victorian fantasies, including Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869), George MacDonald's "The Light Princess" (1864), Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Juliana Ewing's "Amelia and the Dwarfs" (1870), and Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874). In this first half Talairach-Vielmas surveys normative Victorian attitudes toward the female body, from woman's bondage within literary convention in *Mopsa*, to the disciplining of her body by patriarchal medical discourse in "The Light Princess," to the complicity of chastising female voices in *Speaking Likenesses*. She aptly describes the malleability of the child heroine's body and its thematic import: "whether

they float in the air or fall underground, the female bodies metamorphose. Revealingly, such metamorphoses are frequently recuperated by medical discourse or framed by physiological considerations, implicitly constructing women as unstable, mysterious, and potentially dangerous creatures” (p. 89). Throughout, Talairach-Vielmas maintains that literary representation deconstructs normative attitudes toward the female body only to reconstruct ever more debilitating and restrictive ideologies.

While this section of the study is hardly groundbreaking in its import, it provides a very careful and thorough account of Victorian children’s fantasy—a good introduction for any scholar new to the field. Moreover, Talairach-Vielmas’s focus on the body of the girl child, which hasn’t achieved nearly as much critical attention to date as it should, would be useful for literary historians who are particularly interested in gender studies. But this section is only an appetizer. The main course comes in the form of the second half of *Moulding the Female Body*, which examines the effect of commodity culture on the female body in the sensation novel.

In chapters 5 through 9, Talairach-Vielmas investigates Victorian consumerism and womanhood in works by Rhoda Broughton, Charles Dickens, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Wilkie Collins. These fictions and their attention to the material culture of feminine consumption (most notably cosmetics and fashion), argues Talairach-Vielmas, expose the “extent to which the nature of woman was hinged upon contradictions” (p. 90). Like children’s fiction, which regularly penalized disruptive female bodies with both verbal and physical abuse, the sensation novel also tied woman to her body. “In these novels,” writes Talairach-Vielmas, “female desire, female diseases, and even female insanity act as so many symptoms of material culture, and the female characters, described as voracious consumers, aptly handle male-preferred definitions of femininity” (p. 90). Unlike children’s fiction, sensation fiction gave female characters a bit more room for resistant practices. If consumerism is one method by which patriarchal discourse shackles femininity, it also proves to be a useful weapon for heroines

seeking to manipulate men or subvert the patriarchal status quo.

Talairach-Vielmas describes this paradoxical dynamic in an admirable reading of Wilkie Collins’s *No Name* (1862). Molded and in some senses abused by the enterprising capitalism of her con-man husband, Collins’s comic Mrs. Wragge epitomizes Victorian female consumerism: she is dazzled by circular advertisements and cannot think past her purchases. Of course, she is also addle-headed, childish, and, as Talairach-Vielmas prominently notes, physically enormous. In every inch and feature she is a vulnerability to the husband who relies on deception and secrecy to make his living. Nevertheless, when her outcome is measured against the fate of the novel’s main character, Magdalen Vanstone, who becomes a professional actress and cons her way into marriage in order to retrieve an inheritance unjustly taken from her, Mrs. Wragge appears the more successful model of womanhood. As Talairach-Vielmas notes, “Magdalen shapes her person as an endlessly reconstructible self, showing how feminine culture and its beauty aids empower women to achieve multiple identities and to engage in a process of self-representation that patriarchal society usually forbids” (p. 137). Yet it is Mrs. Wragge, the shopping addict, for whom “as a physical release from the constraints of her wifely role ... shopping appears to be constructed in subversive terms, enabling her to engage in autonomy away from the fetters of patriarchy” (p. 141). Mrs. Wragge’s shopping achieves what Magdalen’s acting cannot: true subversion. Thus in Talairach-Vielmas’s cogent and thoughtful analysis, Mrs. Wragge, who for most readers is a comic secondary character, becomes the thematic centerpiece of the story.

Although a bit heavy on Wilkie Collins (three of the last five chapters are given over to his works), *Moulding the Female Body* would be a welcome addition to any collection of scholarship on sensation fiction. Though more useful as a set of essays on a similar theme than as a whole, the study is nevertheless an engaging read. Historians and literary scholars will find much to admire and to be inspired by here.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-childhood>

Citation: Carrie Wasinger. Review of Talairach-Vielmas, Laurence, *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23544>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.