



Donald E. Hall. *Fixing Patriarchy: Feminism and Mid-Victorian Male Novelists.* New York: New York University Press, 1997. ix + 236 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-3536-7.



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In this intricate and carefully constructed study, Donald Hall examines the challenge of feminism to male hegemony during the tumultuous three decades of the mid-Victorian era (1840-1860) and explores a range of male responses of the time to the threat against patriarchy. The semantically charged title of his book implies two of the main categories of response under scrutiny. Playing on dual meanings of "fixing," Hall maintains that Victorian men reacted to the troublesome attempts of the British feminists to unsettle fixed notions of gender roles primarily by "fixing patriarchy" in both the sense of working to "repair it" and to "set it firmly in place" (p. 31). His well chosen examples from the literature by male writers of the period serve to convincingly illustrate the dynamic interplay of the women's movement and the literary responses of reparation and retrenchment during this era of great social change.

Hall structures his study in three chronological divisions, using nonfiction to provide a social context and to frame his analysis of literary works. The first section deals with the 1840s, the

decade in which the American feminist movement found an influential voice in Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and the social discourse on women's rights and roles was also intensifying in Britain. Here Hall examines Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess*, and two novels of Charles Kingsley, *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*. He points to Dickens's novel, published during the early years of the British women's movement, as exemplary of the attempt both to shore up and to correct the patriarchal system it portrays and presents Kingsley's activism on behalf of women's education and his positive depiction of women in his fiction as evidence of a rare mid-Victorian effort to negotiate between the camps warring over the "woman question." In his excellent exploration of *The Princess*, Hall very effectively highlights the conflict over the issue of vocalization--that is, whether women shall speak for themselves or be spoken for by men--by discussing this poem in which Tennyson takes up the subject of women's rights in connection with Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. This juxtaposition of Tennyson's voice with Fuller's proves to be a

persuasive technique for illustrating Hall's emphasis on the patriarchal strategy of "subsumption"--a defense mechanism through which males appropriate, modify, and reissue the words and ideas of women.

Part Two of the study treats the 1850s, a period of growing political activism for feminists in England during which the Women's Suffrage Petition (1851) was presented to the House of Lords. Within the cultural and political context of increasing feminist "contestation," Hall examines William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Newcomes*, Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, and Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. He finds that although Thackeray presents aggressive and competitively successful women characters (mainly as revealers of the rapacity of capitalism) and Dickens demonstrates in this novel a "laudable concern with male corruption" (p. 129), both novels ultimately work to reestablish patriarchy. Against the picture in these novels of at least some accommodation of changing ideas of gender, Hall counterpoises Hughes's novel, which he asserts is in its outright misogyny, a "marker of retrenchment" (p. 152).

In Part Three, focusing on the 1860s as a period of incremental progress for women, Hall nicely interweaves ideas from essays of the period with his exploration of the fiction... For example, Harriett Martineau's essay "Female Industry" (1859), introduces his treatment of Wilkie Collins's novels (*The Woman in White*, *Man and Wife*, and *Armadale*) as illustrative of positive changes in the depiction of women in fiction that mirrored the changing roles of women in the culture. Similarly, he opens his discussion of the politically astute women in Trollope's novels, particularly *Barchester Towers* and *The Prime Minister*, with an excerpt from Anne Isabella Robertson's lecture to the Irish National Society for Women's Suffrage (1872) in which she proclaims a widening of the traditionally held "woman's sphere" into politics.

The final section also rounds out Hall's exploration of a Dickens novel from each of the three

decades. His design in examining Dickens's work over time is calculated to demonstrate generally the evolution of discourse in response to social change and, in particular, to illustrate Dickens's various and somewhat incrementally accommodating responses to the steady "unfixing" of gender roles occurring in society. In *Great Expectations*, he finds evidence of accommodation in the novelist's complex depiction of "transgressive" women but of fearful resistance to female self-determination in Dickens's treatment of women acting together, in community. Hall links Dickens's anxiety over the idea of a community of women with the apprehension and anti-feminist oppression of a male-dominated system that produced the Contagious Diseases Acts, which made women suspected of being prostitutes subject to forced examination for venereal disease. While he lays his groundwork very carefully for drawing such a connection by emphasizing the interplay of social practice and literary forms, his assertion that several aspects of *Great Expectations* "enabled" the Contagious Diseases Acts seems to place a greater social burden on the novel than it was meant to bear.

Although the study concentrates on the mid-Victorian years, its discursive interrogation of gender conflict and of male strategies for preserving power illuminates the entire Victorian era (and beyond). In addition to incorporating the voices of British feminists of the nineteenth century, Hall draws extensively upon the work of twentieth-century feminists and theorists. The result is a book that is rich in feminist scholarship and insightful in its application of contemporary theory to Victorian literature.

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