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Tom Winnifrith

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Nancy Henry

Fallen Women in the Nineteenth-Century Novel by Tom Winnifrith (St. Martin's Press, 1994)

Focusing on the figure of the 'fallen woman' in nineteenth-century fiction, Tom Winnifrith's *Fallen Women in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* examines the sexual mores of fictional characters in the context of nineteenth-century sexual values generally, as well as in light of the personal conduct and reputations of authors who span the century. Winnifrith looks sweepingly at the novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. A chapter is devoted to each of these authors, while Mrs. Henry Wood, the focus of the Introduction, serves throughout as a whipping girl and emblem of stereotypical 'Victorian' values. Winnifrith judges her harshly, taking a jab at those twentieth-century critics who would revive our interest in Victorian popular literature, and concluding, 'it is difficult to take Wood seriously as a novelist and it is now time to relegate her to her position as a Victorian wall-flower and let others take the floor'(5).

While the novelists examined here are hardly in danger of being eclipsed, in scholarship or in the classroom, by Mrs. Henry Wood, this concentration on the subject of sexual mores through a systematic evaluation of particular works, will be illuminating to students of the period. Winnifrith starts with the assumption that students today have a difficult time understanding nineteenth-century attitudes to sex and sexuality and that they are inhibited in their understanding of nineteenth-century novels by received clichés about Victorian prudishness and by the totality of the very different social code by which they themselves live. His book, he hopes, will enable students today to see the complexity of opinions and the diversity of factors which influenced the perspectives of those canonical authors which they are still most likely to encounter.

Winnifrith's touchstone throughout in explicating specific fictional situations is what he perceives to be the character of sexual values at the present time, and he does not hesitate to make direct comparisons. The difference is, that with the novel before us, we can define the boundaries of the evidence Winnifrith offers to support his claims. His attention to detail at times provides powerful support for his argument that these authors often draw moral conclusions which seem to reject or challenge the conventions of their time. Yet in the instances of twentieth-century parallels, each reader has only his or her experience with which to limit the scope of Winnifrith's observations. For example, Winnifrith argues that our interpretation of the sexual relationship between Hetty Sorel and Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede* and the circumstances surrounding Hetty's pregnancy are influenced by George Eliot's euphemistic language and inability directly to present the events as they unfold. Winnifrith judges Hetty, suggesting what she should have thought:

One could accuse her of thoughtlessness in not considering the possibility that she might be pregnant, and indeed since she must have conceived before 18 August she ought to have been worried by 2 November, although a combination of Victorian innocence and unhappiness over Arthur's

desertion might be considered some sort of excuse. It is difficult to know how ignorant Victorian women were about menstruation because the subject was too delicate to mention. Modern teenagers are less delicate, but they tend only to be convinced they are pregnant after the second period is missed (56).

While a reader of George Eliot could contest this judgment of Hetty on artistic grounds, and an historian of Victorian culture could suggest documentation to fill in the gaps in what 'we' know about Victorian women's ignorance, how are readers of *Fallen Women* to approach Winnifrith's generalizations about the modified ignorance of 'modern [female] teenagers'? This is the type of interjection with which Winnifrith frequently emphasizes the potential relevance of his nineteenth-century subject matter, but which can seem like an interpretation of Victorian women characters through the lens of one contemporary man's experience.

Fallen Women is an accessible book, providing plenty of narrative and biographical context for the novels discussed. The style is direct and the tone personal. Winnifrith invites his readers to engage his assertions and evaluate his own frank opinions. Doubtless some will concur with his views on late twentieth-century sexual values, while others will be moved to disagree.