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Ingham, Patricia, "Review of The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 268.

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A. G. van den Broek

The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel by
Patricia Ingham (Routledge, 1996)

Patricia Ingham begins her study of six Victorian novels – Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), George Gissing's *The Unclassed* (version of 1884), and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) – by reflecting on the critical commonplace that nineteenth-century representations of gender are concomitantly linked to representations of social class. Broadly speaking, the argument is this: control of the potentially dangerous lower classes by the increasingly empowered middle classes required some sort of justification; the image of the caring, sensitive middle-class woman/soon-to-be-wife eclipsed, or at least helped to offset, the image of the aggressive, competitive middle-class man exercising power over the great unwashed, who, significantly, were often represented by images of fallen or loose women; hence, representations of gender and class were linked, since the representation of one could be used by middle-class apologists to neutralise, if not justify, the presumptuous, often repugnant, representation of the other.

A problem with that argument, however, Ingham points out, is that nineteenth-century England interpreted 'class' in many and very different ways. A multitude of influences meant that notions of 'class' were constantly revised by men and women whose concerns were either moral, social, religious, economic, political, romantic, paternalistic, or combinations of the above. Fluctuating industrial conditions, the passing of the 1832 Reform Act, the introduction of Corn Laws and the New Poor Law of 1834 brought about fundamental changes in political and therefore social standing; economic growth and therefore social development; or economic depression and therefore hardships, social unrest, even riots. Perhaps late eighteenth-century industrial workers could be called the 'lower classes', 'hands', 'workmen', or 'operatives' without risk of insult, but changing times and circumstances in the nineteenth century gradually forced a more sensitive approach to nomenclature. By the middle of that century, for instance, 'lower' and 'hands' had pejorative connotations. As Ingham puts it, using one of her many useful analogies, 'A contemporary linguistic parallel to the avoidance of *lower* and *hands* for the working classes is the recent avoidance of terms like *negroes* or *blacks* for the currently "correct" "African-Americans"' (8). It follows, then, that if representations of class varied, links between class and gender were not as straightforward as has often been supposed.

That revision of a critical commonplace lies at the heart of Ingham's thesis. After tracing 'The Representations of Society in the Early Nineteenth Century' (Chapter 1), 'The Interlocked Coding of Class and Gender' (Chapter 2) and then the 'Changes in the Representation of Class in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century' (Chapter 6), she sets out to demonstrate that the links of class and gender found in her six chosen novels were far more complex and unstable than suggested by the critical stereotyping of Victorian women as either Angel/Home or Whore/Disorder:

. . . Brontë and Gaskell each perceive and re-present domesticity and the Angel/House sign in a subversive way, whereas Dickens has an unstable perception of the Whore/Disorder sign.... These individual perceptions have the consequence of releasing the representation of gender from neutralising class conflict, and of allowing new accounts of femininity to emerge. (30)

[Debates over social class, especially ones involving the lower middle classes 'whose uncertain position on the greasy pole is already referred to before the middle of the century', continued to develop in the second half of the nineteenth century, and are reflected in *Felix Holt*, *The Unclassed* and *Jude the Obscure*.] In them, the early focus on the issue of social justice and on ameliorating poverty and deprivation in the three earlier novels gives way to other considerations. These texts concentrate on questions of moral and social worth and on moral improvement and social mobility. Their interventions in the general debate about these subjects are radicalised by the appearance in the two later novels of the previously invisible working-class woman as a central figure, and by a rewriting of the fallen woman. In different ways all three novels contribute to the unlocking of the languages of class and gender which had served largely to immobilise the treatment of both these subjects. (111-2)

In her analysis of Eliot's novel, though, on which I will focus for the remainder of this review, few new accounts of gender and class emerge. Ingham says that *Felix Holt* is not a radical but a conservative (123-4); his interest in the working class has to do with seeing them as 'threatening and irredeemable' (121); his schemes for them are, at best, vague and inconclusive (125). Moreover, instead of showing a genuine and detailed understanding of the lower classes, the narrator 'falls back on the stereotyping Eliot had dismissed [in her 1856 essay on von Riehl] to present the working class as "the masses": monolithic, undifferentiated and dangerous' (121). Meanwhile, Esther's characterization also suffers from stereotyping when she rejects Harold Transome in favour of Lantern Yard and, eventually, a life with Felix Holt. She saves Felix by marrying him, but their marriage is really a *deus ex machina*: '... Eliot uses it to figure the harmonious future for workers who, like women, recognise their nature as inferiors and their duty to stay put' (128). However, the whole novel is not, therefore, a failure, because even though its political half may be deeply problematic, the other half, involving Mrs Transome, is very fine. Mr Transome is not 'declassed, not degraded but tragic in her capacity to suffer.... Her significance decisively separates the issues of gender from that of class, fracturing the structure of the novel as it does so' (136).

Where Ingham is concerned, to agree or disagree with these very familiar conclusions depends on whether or not you accept her argument that *Felix Holt* contains 'two discourses', involving male and female narrative voices. The male voice, she believes, is a given, an inevitability: 'Since *Felix Holt* is a text about political events it is naturally the

masculine voice which interprets them'. The question of extending the franchise briefly involved the question of women's suffrage, which Eliot had doubts about, and 'To write authoritatively on the franchise *therefore* required a masculine voice competent to do so' (114-5). Let slide the words I have emphasized and you will also accept the sentence 'The skillful deployment of legal technicalities by the narrator validates *his* implicit claim to speak magisterially on large issues like social panoramas or politics' (115; again, my emphasis).

Should we accept, though? Are we not talking about a writer with an extraordinary intellect and clarity of vision, command of history and awareness of her times – hardly an average nineteenth-century woman – and *therefore* capable of speaking magisterially, authoritatively and skilfully on issues large *and* small? For that same reason, although I find Ingham's section on Mrs Transome very interesting, especially the overview of sensation novels of the 1860s, I am not persuaded when she says that Mrs Transome should be seen as 'the apotheosis of . . . [accidentally fallen] heroines . . . , transposed into a tragic key' by the novel's female narrating voice 'at odds with the authoritative masculine discourse on class politics' (130).

The Language of Gender and Class is not always an easy book to read for anyone with little or no background in critical theory. There are a few places where some readers, I suspect, will be left briefly bemused or mildly irritated, forced to chew over bits of critical jargon. Nevertheless, Ingham always offers stimulating and thought-provoking analyses of the novels under direct discussion and a great deal of insights into the various changes of language throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, brought about by changing social and political conditions and attitudes affecting class and gender. For the latter alone, the book deserves careful reading.