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## Review of Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction

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**Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*  
(Cornell University Press, 1996). ISBN 0 8014 3132 8; 0 8014 8255 0.**

My favourite exam 'howler' came from a first year student who wrote lyrically of the episode in *Wuthering Heights* in which Cathy opened the window, 'and the Moors came pounding in' - as though a hundred dark-skinned men on horse back came trampling over Cathy's prostrate body. Susan Meyer's book, *Imperialism at Home*, while in no way suggesting anything so ludicrous as a north African invasion of a lonely house on the Yorkshire moors, does, nevertheless, lend a certain logic to the idea. Meyer's point is that we should read the abundant oriental imagery and allusions in Victorian fiction by women much more *literally* than we would usually be inclined. For Meyer, such imagery is not simply representative of some indeterminate exoticism, or passion, or power, but rather a sign of the real economic and social relations of colonialism that underpinned the domestic world represented in the novel.

This, of course, is not new ground. Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), the geo-political world of European literature has been opened up, exploded even, by the realization that within it can be identified signs of Europe's economic and cultural exploitation of the East. In her study Meyer draws on, and enters into debate with critics such as Said, and others who have explored these ideas specifically in relation to the nineteenth-century novel, such as Azim, Brantlinger, Spivak, and Sharpe. Often the differences between Meyer's work and previously published studies are small ones - points of emphasis rather than widely differing interpretations. Her particular focus is the way in which the insistent linking - or as she puts it, 'yoking' - of white women and peoples of non-European races is negotiated in the works of three canonical British women, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë and George Eliot.

The evidence of this 'yoking' that Meyer presents is quite overwhelming. The sheer weight of references to white women as mulattos, Africans, 'Orientals', Jews, and gypsies, that she points out in the various texts is very striking indeed. In her introduction, she points out that this 'yoking' has already been made by scientific writers of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and she cites some astonishing passages from Charles White and J. F. Blumenbach on the 'africanisation' of pregnant white women. From then on, however, Meyer does not make much of the particular grounding in scientific racial theories that underlie the Brontës' and especially Eliot's apprehension of race. This leads to some problems in Meyer's interpretations. In *The Mill on the Floss*, in particular, she overlooks Eliot's sympathy, at least at this stage of her life, with racial theories of amalgamation, or racial fusion - theories which, no matter how distasteful they may now appear, nevertheless, in Eliot's time, carried the mark of scientific prestige. Instead, Meyer emphasizes almost exclusively the political or social dimension of the linking of white women and the dark races: for all three writers, she argues, it signified a shared oppression between women and other races. In all the texts, she aspires to find a 'critique of imperialism' - the dual oppressions of women and non-white races which, she points out, were often conflated in the metaphorical schemes of the texts.

Meyer's pursuit of this critique of imperialism certainly makes the novels more acceptable to

late twentieth-century liberal readers, but it is sometimes at odds with the intellectual and political culture of their contemporary world, and the known beliefs and interests of their writers. In *Jane Eyre*, for instance, Jane's independence achieved at the end of the novel, is concomitant with a 'purification' of the English domestic world of the taint of imperial ideology. But, Meyer claims, reading against the grain of the text, the inclusion of references to the accoutrements and products of empire in the final passages of the novel – the 'Indian ink', for instance, which she claims, 'erupts' in the last passages of the novel, puncturing the even surface of the resolution – demonstrate the novel's awareness, and thus, for Meyer, 'critique' of the continuing oppressions of imperialism. In *The Mill on the Floss*, on the other hand, according to Meyer, Eliot does not attempt to distinguish the 'nutbrown' Maggie from the darker races, with whom she is repeatedly compared. Rather Meyer sees her brownness as a sign of her attachment, or entitlement, to some prior, pre-imperial freedom – before patriarchy and colonialism. Her annihilation by drowning, the inevitable result of progress, shows that this ideal state is no longer a possibility in the modern world.

The five main chapters of Meyer's book focus on each of the texts under discussion – Charlotte Brontë's juvenilia, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Daniel Deronda*, producing sustained and complex readings of each. They are all interesting, and frequently surprising, rightly drawing attention to the entanglements of notions of race and gender in each. But the conclusions she comes to are not altogether convincing. Of the two chapters on Eliot, the one of *The Mill on the Floss* raises specific problems. In particular, I would take issue with Meyer's reading of the novel as unquestionably nostalgic. Meyer finds in the novel an endorsement of a kind of primitivism that is not really commensurate with its otherwise measured, but nonetheless profound commitment to social progress – which, for Eliot, I believe, would *not* entail a critique of the processes of imperialism, as Meyer suggests. The forthright subject matter of *Daniel Deronda* makes her reading of this novel more persuasive.

Meyer consistently wishes to find in these novels political sentiments that match our own. In many ways this is an admirable pursuit, but it cannot always succeed. In *Imperialism at Home* one feels that a more precise historical framework would have produced different, if at times less appealing, readings of the novels. Nevertheless, there is much important material in this work. Meyer's readings of the texts are intriguing, and at times compelling. They certainly open the novels to new readings, even if ultimately they seem somehow misjudged.

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