Review of Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel

Deborah Wynne

Dorothea Brooke was reluctant to accept the bequest of her mother’s jewellery, but was George Eliot equally resistant to the allure of pretty things? Deborah Wynne thinks not. Wynne cites a letter from Eliot to her friend Elma Stuart in which the energizing pleasure of ‘little joys’ is a cause for celebration:

> it is cheering to think that there are blue clocks as well as troubles in the world. There is another spiritual daughter of mine whom I should gladly see eager about some small delight – a china monster or a silver clasp – instead of telling me that nothing delights her. One can never see the condition of the world truly when one is dead to little joys. (p. 89)

The strategic significance of such small delights is Deborah Wynne’s topic in this book. Wynne is not the first to cast an eye on women’s relationship with property in this period. Tim Dolin’s *Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel* (1997), for example, examines the representation of independently propertied women in Victorian fiction. Wynne’s focus, however, is not on the property that women owned but on the property that – before the Married Women’s Property Acts in the late nineteenth century – they were not legally entitled to possess: when Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s purse was stolen by a pickpocket, the thief was charged with stealing the property of her husband. Wynne emphasizes that when we consider the treatment in Victorian fiction of women’s things – linen, china, jewellery, pieces of furniture and items of dress – we need to bear in mind the restrictions upon women’s ownership of those things. She wants to draw our attention away from commodity culture and display towards less substantial, everyday objects, such as teacups, handkerchiefs, pincushions, and dolls, and by pursuing the ways in which such things circulate, or cease to circulate, in fictional texts, to demonstrate some of the means by which women evaded or challenged the constraints of property law.

*Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* reflects and develops the current interest in material culture and ‘thing theory’. But Wynne is less interested in the materiality – the ‘thinginess’ – of things than she is in the reciprocal relations between humans and objects and the way in which things function within a property relationship. This relationship is framed by law and custom, but it also encompasses the sentiments, bonds and aspirations which may be invested in apparently trivial objects. Through a detailed examination of women’s wills, Wynne demonstrates that Victorian women ‘treated the will as a text through which the world can be reshaped’ (p. 97) by maintaining tight control over the destiny of their favourite objects and bequeathing items which, strictly speaking, were not theirs to bequeath. Wynne’s argument is that Victorian women created for themselves feelings of ownership, claiming and performing ownership in ways which may not have been sanctioned by the law but in practice were rarely challenged. One of her key examples here is that of the Dodson sisters in the *Mill on the Floss*, who retain an identity as ‘Dodsons’ which overrides the claims of marriage and – at least in the case of Sophy Pullet and Jane Glegg – treat their possessions as though they are beyond the reach of the laws of coverture.

Wynne’s fictional case-studies are the novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Henry James. By keeping a close eye on everyday objects and tracing their circulation through
the narrative, Wynne is able to offer fresh insights into some much-discussed texts. Her account of the travels of Esther’s handkerchief in *Bleak House* is particularly intriguing: the handkerchief is passed from woman to woman, from rich to poor, but, noting that ‘no one asserts a claim to ownership and each woman accepts another’s need for it’ (p.71), Wynne argues that the novel is Dickens’s most radical vision of collective property and female community as an alternative to patrilineal forms of property transmission. Connection is also the theme of Wynne’s chapter on the writings of George Eliot, but here her focus is on the position women occupy as equivocal beings, as ‘makeshift links’ facilitating the transmission of property between men. Wynne argues that there is a noticeable development in Eliot’s representation of women’s emotional attachment to things. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the pleasures of possession are demonstrated but also satirized. In *Middlemarch*, personal property is renounced or refigured as something else, something that transcends the material world, but Wynne observes that the women in *Middlemarch* generally get what they want as far as property is concerned. But it’s in *Daniel Deronda*, written between the passing of the first and second Married Women’s Property Acts, that Wynne finds Eliot’s strongest indictment of women’s ‘makeshift’ existence and locates it in their exclusion from property ownership. This is exemplified in the circulation of jewellery, especially of the Grandcourt diamonds which are passed on from one woman to another in an illusion of ownership. The diamonds are associated in the novel with poison and pain, in contrast to Gwendolen’s own turquoise necklace, which is belittled by Grandcourt as shabby but increasingly comes to signify hope and redemption. This emphasis on the adaptability and transformability of objects, Wynne argues, indicates Eliot’s continuing sense of the tangential nature of women’s relationship with the material world – but it is also, perhaps, a reflection of Eliot’s increasing awareness of the potency of ‘little joys’.

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