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MILLENNIAL VICTORIA

By Alison Booth

HAVING SURVIVED THE Y2K HYSTERIA, we may feel we have entered new corridors of one hundred and one thousand years. But it is only in 2001 that the punctilious and historical among us may at last observe a centennial, truly the final year of the past century and the hundredth anniversary of the death of Queen Victoria.[1] The Jubilees in the last decades of Victoria's life, and the ceremonies of international mourning that followed her death, might seem to have said goodbye to all that, but in many ways we are still under the sway of the great queen who lent her name to the age before "the American century." Our own *fin-de-siècle* urges us to rediscover the many forms of Victoria that have "been hidden in plain view for a hundred years," as Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich put it in their co-edited collection of essays, *Remaking Queen Victoria* (1).[2] While North American and British feminist studies have dwelt among Victorian ways since the 1970s — with implications that I will consider below — the queen herself has recently commanded critical attention that might seem, like so many features of Victoria's public performance, out of proportion. Yet that excess, like our obeisance to the arbitrary power of the calendar, seems to be the very stuff of imagined community and ideological construction, and thus worth watching in action. In any case, when feminist literary critics such as Adrienne Munich, Margaret Homans, and Gail Turley Houston devote years to writing full-length studies of a woman who was neither a feminist nor a professional writer, we should take notice. A review of the distinctive achievements of Munich's *Queen Victoria's Secrets* (1996), Homans's *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837–1876* (1998), and Houston's *Royalties: The Queen and Victorian Writing* (1999) offers an invitation to explore the territory of Victoria and Victorianism in feminist studies. In one light, the assured, wide-ranging excellence of these related studies marks, if not a new epoch, at least a realization of the hopes for a fusion of feminist literary criticism with poststructuralist and materialist cultural studies. In another light, we may read in these volumes reiterations of Victorian modeling, traces of perpetual efforts to represent historical womanhood.

Let us begin, in the spirit of the popular iconography recalled in these volumes, with the anachronistic joke of Queen Victoria. When my eleven-year-old son saw the cover of *Queen Victoria's Secrets*, he got the joke, that is, the allusion to the chain of lingerie stores and catalogues (only now eclipsed as porno-marketing by Abercrombie and Fitch). I did have to explain that the commercial name plays with the idea of the prudish Victorian, if

not the Queen herself. Munich's discussion of Victorian uproar about "petticoat rule," and of Victoria's promotion of a then-hot fashion for red flannel petticoats (156–86), may seem somewhat removed from recent displays in the mall: the rows of perfect, headless amputees in bikini underwear amid white angels' wings or the red velvet and gold sconces of a brothel. Yet the gender and sexuality of the Queen and of women in the office today are alike secrets advertized under uniform fashions of upper-middle-class femininity, secrets in the public scrutiny of satire (Anita Hill, Monica Lewinsky, "Mrs. Brown"?).

The sexual politics of Victoria are more commonly obscured in one self-deconstructing joke about her: she is the queen who said, "We are not amused." (My son knows this one, *and* he knows that she never said that, having read *The Vile Victorians*.)[3] Yet she contained multitudes, as Munich recounts:

> Ultimately she became iconic: a figure of benevolent, maternal imperialism to some, a virago of chaotic desires to others; a homely middle-class folk heroine to most or, as many think of her today, a figure of somber repression who, denied pleasure, denied it to others by not being amused. (6)

As Houston adds in introducing her work, third in line, Victoria's "complexity" affords "room for many to study this fascinating monarch" (ix).

In different registers, these books begin with the anomaly, trick, or joke of a woman who rules or trumps men. The cover of Munich's book announces the incongruous humor of its celebrated subject: light blue and yellow framing a period cartoon of a jowly little old lady perched on the piling of a pier, bonnet for crown, umbrella for scepter, waiting without hope for, perhaps, the ship of state that rules the waves. A more puzzling, strategic character appears in the elegant black cover of *Royal Representations*, with its tinted image of a playing card c. 1860, an inverted double queen of diamonds, captioned "Victoria, *reine d'Angleterre*," reminiscent of the perpetual widow's "staged absences" (Homans 146) and ambiguous memorials. The cover of *Royalties*, repeating Munich's yellow and blue and the asymmetries of a political cartoon, suggests more admiration for a young, pretty, undaunted queen, who outweighs six "Light Sovereigns," the male monarchs of Europe lifted high in the opposite pan of a merchant's scale.

The contrasting titles and covers, appropriate to the differing tempers and tempos of their contents, nevertheless exaggerate the differences among these works, which naturally coincide in some of their materials, methods, and concerns. Though these books seem to be in conversation, the publication sequence is such that Munich and Houston cite articles by Homans that form parts of *Royal Representations*, whereas Homans's and Houston's later books refer extensively to *Queen Victoria's Secrets*. All three works build upon the co-edited collection, *Remaking Queen Victoria*, to which Houston was a contributor. *Queen Victoria's Secrets* and *Royal Representations* range more widely through the queen's career, whereas *Royalties* focuses upon the theme of legal status and authorship; all rest on strong historical scholarship. Coming last, Houston's work has little to add on the paradoxes of female sovereignty, but it contributes substantial material from Victorian sources untouched in the earlier works, particularly in regard to legal discourse and the relations among particular authors. To suggest that these monographs are rivals would be to suggest that someone could claim a copyright on the Victorian age. Here are portraits of Queen Victoria as different as the divergent engravings, paintings, or photo-

graphs of the Queen. Remarkably, a reader feels a sort of growing appetite rather than a surfeit of Victoriana in these engaging books. Even someone who has read numerous accounts of Victoria will be surprised in each chapter by a new body of texts or a fresh interpretation, and any lingering suspicion of an imperial monopoly of recognition yields to an appreciation of the productive conundrum Victoria poses for us still.

Homans's and Munich's books set out to counteract a perceived underestimation or reduction of Victoria, and to uncover the workings of her "symbolic empire" (Munich 2); "Victoria herself suffers, not just the overshadowing of her own monumental artistry but the complete obliteration of her person. . . . We use the word 'Victorian' without thinking about Queen Victoria" (Homans 227). Though "Victorianists do not regard Victoria as central to her era," writes Munich, the queen "performed cultural work for her age" (2). Homans, too, offers a self-aware compensatory "study of representational agency," the queen's performative acts (xxxi). Victoria having become ubiquitous once more, Houston perhaps serves less as rescuer than as fellow-strategist: "My study assumes, then, that the author is not dead, and neither is the queen" (5).

Like the age of Victoria, these studies are surcharged with collected curiosities. (Recall, in chapter five of *Orlando*, how the storm cloud of the nineteenth century "altered" "the constitution of England," leading to a "fecundity" of "ill-assorted objects," "crystal palaces, bassinettes, military helmets, memorial wreaths" "piled higgledy-piggledy . . . where the statue of Queen Victoria now stands" [227–32].) In Woolfian or Barthesian spirit, these books read exhibits, episodes, and texts of varied form and stature, often the self-consuming artifact or "failed allegory," such as memorial statuary of the Prince or Queen (Homans 99). Houston quotes Lytton Strachey's characterization of the queen as commodity maven, as passionate collector of objects and of photographic catalogues of those objects (55–6). Munich and Homans frequently offer fine close readings of the same text in a similar light: Lewis Carroll's Alice books; the famous photograph of Victoria with dispatch boxes under a canopy, guarded by her servant Abdul Karim; Sir Edwin Landseer's *Windsor Castle in Modern Times*, with dogs and wife at attention before Albert's sportsmanlike splendor; Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, the laureate's "Morte d'Albert," according to Swinburne (Homans 182); popular ballads, journalistic imagery, spectacles, locations. Literary history remains prominent in all three studies, in discussions of such instances as Elizabeth Barrett's early tributes to Victoria (Munich 15–22; Houston 120–24) and the poet's parallel queenly courtship with Browning (Homans 33–43); John Ruskin's frenzied paean to middle-class "queens" (Munich 21–2; Homans 67–74), to which Houston adds Mary Bradford Whiting's review underlining the "class implications" in "Of Queen's Gardens" (73–4, 85–6); Margaret Oliphant's acerbic commentary upon the career strategies of good women *à la* Victoria (Munich 99, 220–21; Homans *passim*, especially 67–85) and the parallel careers of Oliphant and the Queen (Houston, ch. five); Charles Kingsley's commentaries upon the Queen's role as middle-class, Anglo-Saxon representative (Munich 48–52; Homans 137–38, 146–50); Dickens's peculiar contest of wills with his female sovereign, from his refusal to meet or perform for her to his jesting romantic infatuation with the young queen (Houston 92–3), and the gender anxieties encoded in his *Kunstlerroman* (101–14).

The Queen's reign is the prevailing discursive paradox. Victoria appears as a construction of the incompatible scripts for sovereignty and femininity. "To function simultaneously as wife, mother, and queen fitted no Victorian conventions," according to Munich

(20), yet her name and image were used to reinforce those very conventions. In Houston's vision, the reign of a queen threw "Victorian gender performance" into a parlous state, particularly for members of the profession of authorship (111), competing managers of representations (3). This begins to seem like a collective megalomania, projecting a proliferation of replicas of queenship. Victoria's self-contradictory "uniqueness" was "fragmented and multiplied" in the ideal of queenly middle-class women (Munich 194); Homans affirms, "To survey the British literary scene of this time is to find queens multiplying everywhere" (68). The Queen's supposed unfitness to rule, her scrupulous illustration of patriarchal domesticity with Albert, and her disavowal of ceremonial functions during widowhood strangely ensured the perpetuation of British monarchy (Munich 11). As shown in Houston's careful consideration of Blackstone's *Commentaries* and of Maitland's later critique of the concepts of *corporation sole* and the king's two bodies, Victoria promotes and at the same time smooths over a constitutional crisis, as exception to the masculine rule (17–24). Homans more pointedly asserts that "the monarch of nineteenth-century Britain had to be a woman, and a married woman; [further,]. . . for the monarchy to complete its transformation into a wholly symbolic function at the head of a representative state, the best possible occupant of the throne was a widow" (101).

Many Victorias were available, some serially, some simultaneously: the wise virgin overawing a decadent state, but leaning too much toward Lord Melbourne; the enamored and elated young wife reviving Anglo-Saxon chivalry; the young mother leaning upon Prince Albert's arm as sponsor of Industry and Arts; the spiderlike widow overindulging in death; the woman of the people chatting with Highlanders; the admiring fan of famous authors, herself a rival author; Mrs. John Brown; the donor of the Bible, "the secret of [Britain's] greatness," to the African chief (Munich 144–45), and the Empress of India wearing the Koh-i-Noor diamond; the indestructible, prolific mother, grandmother, and matchmaker of Europe; the conspicuous home-and-mausoleum decorator (tartan carpets at Balmoral! [Munich 46]) who eschewed a crown and nay-sayed the fashion of the ladies of her realm.

On this common if shifting ground, Munich, Homans, and Houston construct edifices that differ in structure and detail, as well. Most conspicuously, Homans's prose has a tighter weave and more intricate argument than Munich's or Houston's, guiding the reader unfailingly through unexpected scenes across a limited time-span — "selected moments from the start of Victoria's reign up to 1876" (xxv) — , the concrete immediacy and aesthetic richness masterfully linked to a developing argument about representation. Whereas the Queen herself might become "a personification with the seams showing" (99), there are no loose threads in *Royal Representations*. Munich's book eschews the historian's focused chronology for the time-traveller's privileges of comparison (we begin with the so-called "statue" of Queen Victoria in Bryce Canyon, Utah [1]). The chapters of *Queen Victoria's Secrets* divulge thematic secrets, in some alignment with the ages of the Queen's reign; Munich also provides an outline chronology (xiii–xx) that would have been helpful in *Royal Representations*. Within each chapter, Munich's frequent shifts of focus are announced by lively titles in neo-gothic typeface, with effective epigraphs. Juxtapositions resonate unremarked; illustrations are dished up for the reader to relish on her own. Many academic readers will be more at home and yet at ease in *Royalties*, in which a clear style examines a remarkable range of contemporary responses to a female sovereign. The documentary evidence is broad and illuminating; apart from the chapters

that focus on Dickens, Barrett Browning, and Oliphant, a thematic gathering of various sources allows, at times, for a disregard of the specific shifts in public outlook across the phases of Victoria's long reign. At times, as well, the claims for the effects of Victorian gender ideology struck me as conventional rather than argued: "the Victorian naturalization of male authority resulted in barely concealed anxieties that took the rhetorical form of teaching the queen and women their 'home lessons'" (76), "home lessons" having become Houston's shorthand for the enforcement of separate spheres. Familiar as readers will be with the ironies of such gender codes, they will profit immensely by Houston's fresh material and apt readings of varieties of texts beyond the standard works of Dickens, Barrett Browning, and Oliphant. In short, the flavors in these three studies are different, the feasts far too ample to do full justice to here, though I will mention more of what is in store for readers.

There's something about Victoria that draws out the eccentric collector. Thus, each scholar displays her own cabinet of curiosities, of which I sample some striking findings unique to each study. Munich, for example, features the spectacle of Victoria and Albert throwing a costume ball to alleviate the sufferings of the Spitalfields silkweavers (28); the manufacture of a Scottish homeland and Anglo-Saxon genealogy that at once serves Victoria's rule and affirms Albert's masculinity; contemporary views of menopause and the animus against the woman of a certain age, as displayed in Gilbert and Sullivan; Victoria's extreme affinity for dogs; her collection of handsome Indian servants; and the construction of Victoria in masochistic narratives of domination and submission (Havelock Ellis, Swinburne, and flagellation make very interesting appearances in *Queen Victoria's Secrets* [168–86]). *Royal Representations* likewise offers riches unassessed by Munich or Houston, perhaps most notably: the semiotics of stature, relative position, and light-vs.-dark in the lugubrious series of royal photographs before and after Albert's death (Munich and Houston do glance at similar representations); Victoria's responses to Reform or to public opinion through calculated appearances (at ceremonies for the Prince of Wales' wedding or recovery from illness, for example) or absences; the "public national project" of Albert memorials, in all their anachronistic ambiguity (the modern, balding Prince in armor, perhaps sheathing or unsheathing his sword [159–68]); both *Idylls of the King* and Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic illustrations of them as almost deliberate failures: "allegory cannot survive the gravitational pull of realist depiction" (187). In a rare first-person appearance, a sort of Munichian fillip, Homans comments on Cameron's "women models' greasy long hair. . . . I think of how itchy the models' heads must have been" (209). Houston too presents unique finds, such as the appeals to the natural order of the bee hive in Mrs. Trimmer's *Fabulous Histories* or a cartoon by Cruikshank (18–19), or the fact that Victoria named a Skye terrier Boz. Houston expands upon Homans's interest in Victoria's publications, especially *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* and *More Leaves*, those ingenuous or brilliantly strategic appeals to the voyeuristic public, in which Victoria "pretends not to be the Queen" (Homans 135). Houston adds fascinating details concerning authors' responses when the Queen "competed with literary writers in their own arena" (61), and Victoria's own construction of her authorship. When Dickens finally attended the Queen's levee, he "pontificated about . . . class issues — while she gave the famous author *More Leaves*, which bore the inscription: 'From the humblest of authors to one of the greatest,'" thus each claiming a right to speak in the other's sphere of authority (93). We read of Margaret

Oliphant's criticism of the Queen's naive and artless journals, firmly limiting the amateur's efforts: "the author sees her profession as equally important to Victoria's without denigrating either woman," while Oliphant praises women as sovereigns in general: It is "'curious to note how kindly the feminine mind takes to the trade of ruling whenever the opportunity occurs to it'" (159).

All three volumes point to pivotal issues in the discourses of gender and representation, the questions of subjectivity and agency, though Homans engages with theoretical and methodological questions the others set aside. Homans notes a distinction between her approach and Munich's in her introduction, "The Queen's Agency." The two projects differ on the matter of a persistent "antithesis" in feminist studies of historical women such as queens, between claims of "self-determination" or "social construction" (xxxii-xxxiv). Rather than imagining Victoria as autonomous agent on the one hand, or as hapless creature of Foucauldian discourses on the other, Munich, as Homans aptly observes, posits a "collaboration" in which "Victoria and her subjects were engaged . . . in mutual construction." The focus of *Queen Victoria's Secrets* is on "reading the images produced" rather than "assigning responsibility for producing them" (Homans xxxiii). Curiously, Homans risks portraying Victoria-as-agent, builder of monuments, writer of memoirs and dispatches — curiously, because Homans's volume affiliates with those by Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong, and others ostensibly animated by Foucauldian suspicion of autonomous agency. Indeed, Homans depicts Victoria's "authorship as a historical construct" (xxxvi), and in a style still inflected by Yale deconstruction, exposes gaps of representation, "performances of absence" (60), and dislocated tropes, with an admixture of Berkeley's "representations." Yet she restates the dilemma faced by feminist theorists who are committed to restoring recognition where it has been denied; for historical women, claims to subjectivity need to be made before they can be called into question (xxxvi). Thus what is a theoretical impasse becomes a productive paradox, leading these three critics partially to "concede . . . a primary agency" to Victoria (Homans xxxiii), rather than reduce her to a pawn. Without venerating Victoria as a coherent biographical subject, Munich plays with the Queen's appearances within and beyond a monarch's control. *Victoria's Secrets* reveals affinities for postmodernist eclecticism as well as a fine tradition of Victorianist studies of sister arts: a method of accretion and ekphrasis rather than deconstruction. Houston in her turn is neither so theoretical nor so spectacular by inclination; she formulates her interpretations by the lights of biographical and historical realism more than Munich or Homans does. Yet *Royalties* coincides with a mainstream of feminist studies acknowledging that subjectivity and gender are constructed through "multiple narratives" (16): "Given the fragmentation of Victorian subjectivity, Britain's longest-reigning monarch, Queen Victoria, seemed the never-ending subject as well as the representative of national identity" (12).

Admiring what each approach yields in unfolding Victoria's representations, I wish to press further the above question of female subjectivity or agency in feminist historical studies, and to consider the common project sponsoring all three works. Homans writes, "I am in part performing one of the humbler tasks of feminist literary history, that of honoring, and in many cases of recovering from oblivion, the woman author's subjectivity, signature, and agency" (xxxvi). The familiar task, then, is feminist recuperation. Yet this is worth probing. In what oblivion has Victoria languished? *Royal Representations* and *Queen Victoria's Secrets* perceive the queen to be marginal, deprived of authority like

many a forgotten woman writer, over fifteen years after a groundbreaking feminist-Victorianist study to which both volumes acknowledge a debt, Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon*, in which Victoria is a presiding spirit (2); Houston omits Auerbach. Published in 1982, at the turning point in feminist studies from "victimization" to a "celebrat[ion of] women's powers" in Homans's words (xxxiv), *Woman and the Demon* anticipates many later feminist inquiries, including those at hand. Not only does Auerbach provide blueprints for studying the queens in Carroll, Ruskin, Haggard, Rossetti, *et al*., she might almost be summarizing the major themes of Munich and Homans as well (setting aside Auerbach's emphasis on Victoria's modeling for single women such as Florence Nightingale):

> Ironically, Queen Victoria, that panoply of family happiness and stubborn adversary of female independence, could not help but shed her aura upon single women. Her long and early widowhood that drowned out the memory of her marriage, her relentlessly spreading figure and commensurately increasing empire, her obstinate longevity which engorged generations of men and the collective shocks of history, lent an epic quality to the lives of single women. (119–20)

Houston emphasizes Victoria's function as model not for single women but for Victorian authors, male as well as female.

This *précis* in Auerbach does not at all obviate the achievements of the recent full-length studies, which focus on Victoria as text and author rather than pretext or mascot who "could not help but shed her aura." No one can claim proprietorship of Victoria. But if to some extent we have been here before, how can we construct Victoria as neglected? Scarcely a work of Victorian literary or cultural studies published in the 1980s-1990s omits a few indexed references to Queen Victoria, particularly if empire joins gender, class, and race as categories of analysis (see, for example, Brantlinger and Sharpe). Yet only recently has the queen herself commanded more than atmospheric attention. Deirdre David's *Rule Britannia* (1995) features illustrations of Victoria (including on the paperback cover) that appear in Homans or Munich, and offers more sustained vignettes of the queen than in most studies primarily focused on novels, while Elizabeth Langland's *Nobody's Angels* (also 1995) devotes an entire chapter to "England's Domestic Queen and Her Queenly Domestic Other" (Langland refers to Munich's and Homans's emerging projects [63, n.1], and Homans and Houston acknowledge Langland [Homans, especially xxxiii-iv; Houston 2, 33]).[4]

Given Victoria's commanding presence in some feminist traditions, the belated claims for neglect of her seem more customary than accurate. It is true that the Queen has been difficult to pose as feminist heroine of literary history, and hence it has taken decades of work to reach the point of current studies of Victoria herself. And it is a great leap forward, in my view, to look through (and within) caricature to reimagine her performances and discursive constructions in narrative space and time. Nevertheless, I must ask if Victoria has not proven altogether too compelling, as a figure for the age that has consumed more than its share of feminist studies. On a related point that I have discussed elsewhere, we might wonder why landmarks of North American academic feminism have so often been *literary* studies of nineteenth-century *British* women novelists. This question of course requires extensive qualification, as decades of feminist work have branched out

from the homeland of Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, Auerbach, Poovey, Armstrong, and others. Yet much feminist scholarship continues to seek in literary history — primarily in realist novels — reflections of representative femininity,[5] and continues to favor the "Victorians," though racial or national categories have questioned what we might call Greenwich time. The incentives for these tropisms, again, are too complex to summarize here. I offer only one of the possible justifications: early feminist academics sought evidence that women had made cultural contributions on a par with men, and the nineteenth-century British novelists were among a handful of indisputably canonical women throughout Western history. Similarly, Victoria has few female peers in modern history. In her own day, Victoria was associated with the triumph of women writers in her age, as implied in a title such as *Queens of Literature of the Victorian Period* (Houston 79). Consider Margaret Oliphant's assessment of "The Literature of the Last Fifty Years" for the Queen's Golden Jubilee (*Blackwoods*): "a brief survey of those writers who will hereafter be known in universal history as of the age of Victoria. It is pleasant . . . that so many of the greatest periods in our literary history should coincide with the reigns of female sovereigns" (394).[6] It seems that Victoria the domestic, the good, the bourgeois encouraged the increasing influence of women and domestic virtues throughout the literate world. Moreover, Victoria in her plain-clothes sentiment and fusion of vocation and marriage plots seems to epitomize an age of classic realist fiction, as reflected for example in the 1897 collection of studies *by* women novelists, *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign*, edited by Oliphant.

Rather than attempt a complete account of feminist Victorianism, I wish here to emphasize the long history of recuperation of model womanhood under the auspices of Victoria. Homans, Munich, and Houston themselves point the way to an understanding of this process, which in conclusion I will illustrate from a sampling of the dozens of short biographies of Queen Victoria that appeared in collections from the 1850s to the 1920s.[7] In an aside, Munich states that by 1901, "Victoria's legend joined other legendary women whose stories were often disseminated in popular compendia of the ten best of a category" (210). Indeed, Victoria broke into such biographical honor rolls in the early decades of her reign. A British queen regnant seemed custom-made to model exemplary Anglo-Saxon womanhood, in itself the pinnacle of civilization, according to some (Hale). On this theme, Homans observes that *Through the Looking-Glass* unravels the Ruskinian "rhetorical practice and the thematics about girls and women giving shape to each other" (92) — motives and motifs shared by the collections of biographies to which Munich alludes. Homans and Munich acknowledge the propensity of women to be allegorized, to be rendered dead symbols (Homans 178), or to be represented as models to each other. Many Victorian commentators cast Queen Victoria's reign as both model and context, as Houston illustrates, for the exemplary careers of her female contemporaries, even for the more radical reformers on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1884, for example, William Henry Davenport Adams published *Celebrated Englishwomen of the Victorian Era*, a collection of biographies that begins with Queen Victoria, "in her august self a remarkable proof of the vigour of character and mental force . . . which 'the weaker sex' can exhibit" (iv). Adams commends Victoria's "nobly useful life" and her "character which all English girls may well do their best to imitate" (1: 86).[8] As Homans and Munich observe, Victoria's conservatism (resistance to Chartism, objections to female suffrage) seems overriden by the perception that she democratized

her nation and performed female leadership — a process of national "feminization," according to Houston (64–5). New modes of middle class women's work were often promoted in the Queen's name, as Edwin Pratt suggests in *Pioneer Women in Victoria's Reign* (1897); nurses and reformers are said to be "following in their Ruler's footsteps"(159–60). Conversely, Victoria could be invoked as progenitor of traditional virtue rather than progress for women. Popular biographies of Victoria from collections of the 1860s (such as Darton and H. G. Adams) or the 1880s (Parton and Fawcett) emphasize her feminine goodness rather than sovereignty; Mrs. E. J. Richmond in 1887 praises a life of "simple, unaffected acts of kindness" (247); Henry C. Ewart in 1889 declares that "goodness has been her real greatness" (27). Rosa Nouchette Carey, in an 1899 collection of "notable good women," fuses the themes of cultural influence and model virtue; Carey equates the nineteenth century with "the Victorian era, when our crowned Lady leads the van" (9). Carey, slightly misquoting One of Her Majesty's Servants, in *The Private Life of the Queen* (168), suggests that "'if the Queen had been destined to write in lieu of ruling, she must have left a great mark on the literature of the country'" (Carey 76; cf. Houston 61). Of course, these three recent studies make much of the fact that she *did* write and *did* place her stamp on Victorian literature. Victoria readily claims authorship, it seems: a multiauthored collection of biographies, *Queen Victoria and Other Excellent Women* (published in London by the Religious Tract Society in 1903) today is catalogued in the British Library under her name (it includes a short life of the late Victoria by James Macaulay).

Omnipotent as model spirit of the age, Victoria seems difficult to catch in the act, though the short collected biographies associate her with all notable women of her day, who in turn become types of a century of progress. Virginia Tatnall Peacock, in her preface (dated from Paris, June 22, 1900) to *Famous American Belles of the Nineteenth Century* (published in 1901 in Philadelphia and London by Lippincott), might have the Queen in mind when she praises the "pre-eminent" belles of "the century now drawing to its close," women whose "names belong no less to the history of their country than those of the men whose genius has raised it to the rank it holds to-day among the nations of the earth" (vii). Like biographers of Victoria, Peacock finds that the history of women melds into a history of technological, national, and imperial progress — it wasn't easy to be a belle before the day of the telegraph or railroad (viii). Peacock celebrates the "charm" and "power of a queenly personality," and looks forward to twentieth-century avatars to rule the "empire" of beauty (ix). Tropes of female sovereignty familiar from early modern or Restoration England almost seem to turn the centuries untouched by changing conditions for middle-class women in industrialized or late capitalist countries. But at the turn of the twentieth century, such tropes unquestionably relied upon the model of Victoria, almost permitted to be sovereign indeed. In *Peerless Women: A Book for Girls* (London and Glasgow, 190[5?]), Jeanie Douglas Cochrane affirms that Britain's "national troubles" were always eased by "messages . . . from a true and tender woman's heart"; the "sufferers" "could do no less than revere Victoria — queen and mother of her people" (19).[9]

Ubiquitous, absent, "everywhere" and "nowhere" (Munich 194) — is Victoria buried or must we come once more to honor her? It is as though a model woman — and what woman is more likely to be read allegorically, archetypally, than a queen regnant? — can emerge in our feminist histories only as the lady who vanishes. Thus, we may study and study her, and discover that we write in disappearing ink. A clue lies in Homans's

concession in the phrase, "humbler task." Why the apology, as though stooping to what has after all been the driving motive of much transformative critical work? Perhaps recuperation resembles housework, always to be done again. Its practitioners may also be accused of ancestor worship and nostalgia, the heroics of rescuing victims, or at least an undertheorized humanist individualism and naive representationalism. Further, historical feminist studies recover one of the figures that provokes the greatest cultural anxiety, the older woman, mother or spinster (Munich 104–26), or the woman in the generational past. These charges, however much they may detract from the reputation of feminist studies, can be met directly or indirectly, as Homans, Munich, or Houston does. I am more concerned by what appears to be a repetition compulsion in feminist cultural histories, as though we, like Victoria, construct endless memorials that confirm the beloved's death as a form of "self-memorializing," in "melancholic" refusal of the closure of "mourning" (Homans 146, 174). At the very least, thinking back through our mothers has hardly resulted in the demise of the myth of the Angel in the House of Victorian fiction, a myth possibly more thriving and useful today than among the Victorians. As Munich writes, "Queen Victoria's secrets . . . return in our own century packaged in different, sometimes astonishing guises" (222). In her multiple representations according to Homans, "the Queen [is displayed] as both the captive and the despot of her own regime" (244). I fear that feminist studies may be locked in that ambiguous embrace of power for the century to come.

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NOTES

1. Among many events, perhaps pre-eminent will be "Locating the Victorians," July 12–15, 2001, hosted by the Science Museum, London, announced as "a major international conference commemorating 150 years since the Great Exhibition and the centenary of Queen Victoria's death."
2. In recent years there has been a spate of studies of *fins-de-siècle*, including Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, Scarry, ed., *Fins-de-Siècle*, and DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns*; and a rash of conferences on late twentieth-century appropriations of the Victorian age, including "Victoria Redressed: Feminism and Nineteenth-Century Studies," coordinated by Hilary Schor and Gerhard Joseph at UC Santa Cruz for the Dickens Project, August 5–8, 1999. On that occasion, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar delivered their new introduction to the revised edition of *Madwoman in the Attic*, an illustration of the prevailing Victorianism in feminist studies that I point to below. To disclose my own implications in feminist Victoriana: my paper for the Santa Cruz conference, "But Why Always the Victorian Novelists?: Canons of Feminist Criticism," along with the essay that I contributed to *Remaking Queen Victoria*, "Illustrious Company" — both of which inflect this review — will form parts of a chapter in my book on collective biographies of women, to be titled "How to Make It as a Woman: Role Model Biographies from Victoria to the Present." In this review I glance at some lives of Victoria distributed through collections that I had not examined by the time of writing "Illustrious Company."
3. One of Terry Deary's series of *Horrible Histories* "not suitable for adults"(6, 20).
4. Houston's *Royalties* (1999) is cited in Homans. Among many recent biographies, Dorothy Thompson's *Queen Victoria* seems to have furnished most for a feminist reading of the Queen.

5. Considerable recent feminist study of Victorian poetry, including poetic narrative, is displacing the fiction monopoly (for example, the work of Dorothy Mermin and Angela Leighton), but teaching texts of poetry or nonfiction prose are slow in coming.
6. Willis J. Abbot in 1913 echoes Oliphant's observation about the ages of English queens. He regards Victoria primarily as sponsor of expanding empire and capitalist technology (197–206).
7. In a sampling of approximately 75 general collections published in English between 1880–1900 (volumes supposedly unrestricted, that might include any kind of notable woman of any nation or period), I count at least twelve biographies of Victoria, more than any other subject in this sample. This count omits the frequent representation of Victoria in specialized collections, for example, of queens, Englishwomen, or Victorians.
8. The other subjects are Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Brontë, Mary Russell Mitford, Mary Somerville, Sara Coleridge (1895?), Mary Carpenter, Adelaide Anne Proctor, George Eliot, and Jane Welsh Carlyle.
9. Other collections featuring Victoria, in addition to those discussed here and in "Illustrious Company," include Bolton (1893?); von Bothmer (setting Victoria first among *The Sovereign Ladies of Europe* [1899]); Thayer, *Women Who Win* (1896); Egermeier (1930); Creighton (1909); Adelman (1926).

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