Book Reviews

Mary Wilson Carpenter. *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexuality, and Religion in the Victorian Market*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 2003. xxii + 206 pp. ISBN: 0-8214-1515-8. $39.95 US.

The Victorian "Family Bible with Notes" was, according to Mary Wilson Carpenter, a "uniquely British institution," first prompted by restrictions on the printing of the Bible in Britain and its colonies. From the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth century the publication of Bibles with notes and commentary allowed printers to avoid restrictions on the printing of the King James or Authorized Version. Printers added engravings and illustrations and sold these Bibles in inexpensive serial editions which, Carpenter argues, are "an important resource for learning how British families read their bibles, or how their bibles read *them*, interpellating them as certain kinds of 'authorized version' subjects" (xv-xvi).

Carpenter traces three phases in the development of the family Bible. The earliest family Bibles—which appeared in the first half of the eighteenth century—promoted themselves as a source of "universal knowledge," providing notes and commentary that attempted to make the whole contents of the Bible (including the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and other

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similar passages) accessible and intelligible to all members of the family. As Carpenter puts it, "Commentary on what is marginalized in relation to the 'family' … suggests that the homosexual subject was even better known than studies of molly houses have proposed." Texts such as *The Compleat History of the Old and New Testament; or, A Family Bible, with … annotations, extracted from the writings of the most celebrated authors* (first published in 1735) not only provided frank discussions of sodomy and effeminacy but also exhibited a fascination with transgressive and undomesticated womanhood that would have been remarkable even in secular publications of the time (17, 20–21). By the early nineteenth century, however, some parts of the Bible came to be considered as unsuitable for family reading. Certain passages were bracketed off or printed in smaller type, with the instruction that they were "To be omitted from family reading." Biblical knowledge was divided between that which was appropriate for the family and that which was to be confined to the "closet," or study by the head of the household: "These Family Bibles market access to the power of *secret* knowledge, to be the exclusive possession of a privileged family member, typically specified as the 'Master of the family'" (xx, 8). As the century progressed, however,

> British Family Bibles demonstrate[d] more and more consciousness of feminine tastes: the frontispieces of patriarchal figures so common in eighteenth century bibles—the "author" of the bible, Moses with the tablets of the Law, or Jesus as princely dispenser of mercy—are replaced by representations of Moses as a baby, far too chubby to float in his wicker basket, or the boy Samuel kneeling in his little nightshirt to say his prayers. (56)

Drawing on well over a hundred examples of family Bibles, spanning the period from 1690 to 1886, Carpenter begins to develop a number of suggestive arguments. In addition to her exploration of gender and sexuality she also (as the book's title suggests) places these Bibles in an "imperial" context. One important result of the "bracketing" or "closeting" of certain passages was to mark out much of the sexually explicit material (such as the stories of Sodom or Onan, or Levitical texts on bodily practices) as matters "peculiar to the Jews," so that the figure of the Jew came to represent "'unnatural' sex" (34–38, 44). In this way, Carpenter argues, "the pathologization of sexuality was intimately linked with the production of a sense of national and imperial identity" (37).

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The second half of the book re-reads well-known Victorian women's writings in the context created by the circulation of these "Family Bibles with Notes and Commentary." So, for example, Carpenter devotes one chapter to a discussion of the biblical discourse on menstruation as it appears in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and another to an exploration of the theme of (female) circumcision in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. In both chapters, Carpenter's argument is complicated by an invocation of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and by the employment of "new historicist strategies to expose the traditionalist formation and gender bias of Lacan's writing on the 'Phallus'" (xxii). The final chapter returns to the idea of religion and the Victorian marketplace, taking up the nineteenth century proliferation of commercial "prophetic" texts, which enjoyed growing popularity from the 1820s through to the 1870s. Here Carpenter provides a fresh and compelling reading of texts like Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's *Aurora Leigh,* re-positioning them in the context of British apocalyptic writings.

One of the great strengths of Carpenter's work is her willingness to take commercial religious publications seriously. Despite the tremendous popularity of these Family Bibles, they have attracted surprisingly little attention from either literary critics or scholars of consumer culture. As Carpenter argues, "Scholars have studied the 'higher criticism' of the Victorian era … but the commercial enterprise of religious literature that could be marketed to the 'middling classes,' or those same classes who bought novels in installments or borrowed them from circulating libraries, has been generally thought, ironically, not worth studying" (149–50). And yet, as she rightly notes, religious literature sold for a profit (unlike the tracts given away for free by Victorian religious charities) provides crucial insights into working- and middle-class culture, illuminating the "contradictory and confusing references to biblical texts seeded so liberally throughout Victorian literary texts" (152).

Carpenter takes on a very wide range of topics—religion, race and empire, sexuality, gender, consumer culture—and this is both the strength and weakness of the work. If the book has a flaw, it is that it ranges too widely, and raises too many lines of inquiry, many of which are inevitably dropped almost as soon as they are introduced. In a much-too-brief discussion of the decline of the Family Bible in the late nineteenth century, for example, Carpenter suggests that "In the end, it appears, the New Woman and other radical gender and sexual entities worked to remove the Authorized Version from the center of the family parlor and put it away in a soon-to-be-forgotten trunk in the attic" (66). This is an intriguing

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claim, but nowhere is it adequately developed. Similarly, in her discussion of Brontë's *Villette*, she asserts (but never really demonstrates) that "The novel is underwritten by the assumption common to dissenting bible commentary: that literal truth, even in the foundational text of the English nation, is always figurative" (81). These are complex and important claims, and deserve further attention. Carpenter's book remains, however, a timely reminder of the crucial importance of religion to Victorian studies and of the critical work that remains to be done in this field.

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Ina Ferris. *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. vii + 205 pp.

The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland covers territory well beyond that suggested by its title. Ina Ferris traces developments not only in the Irish national tale, but also in other fictional forms—Irish Gothic and "novels of insurgency"—and in non-fiction including travel narratives, memoirs, and political speeches. All of these genres, she argues, played a key role in shaping national subjectivity in a post-Union, pre-Catholic Emancipation Ireland. Beginning with the Act of Union and concluding with the Emancipation agitation of the 1820s, Ferris uses an impressive synthesis of textual analysis, British Romantic and Irish Studies criticism, and literary theory to describe how Irish writers changed the way they defined their nation's position in its "incomplete Union" with Britain.

"To think about Ireland via the question of incomplete Union," Ferris writes, "is … to move into the foreground a sense of language and public discourse as a mobile scene of agitation and agency (rather than impersonal system and containment) and hence to understand a cultural field in terms of friction as much as analogy or homology" (8–9). The national tale, understood from this perspective, aims to act on both its political environment and its generic predecessors, deliberately shifting the assumptions set by the Anglo-Irish travel narrative to establish a destabilizing subjectivity suited to action in a politically destabilized Ireland.

Ferris uses as an introductory example the case of Percy Shelley, who at nineteen came to Ireland bent on reform with a political pamphlet for the poor already composed, wrote a new one on site for the students of Dublin College (changing both his intended audience and his mode

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