

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Knox, Marisa Palacios. *Victorian Women and Wayward Reading: Crises of Identification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 233 pp.

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<1>Reading, Marisa Palacios Knox maintains, broadens our capacity for identification. For Victorian women, she further argues, this capacity could facilitate empowering identity constructions. *Victorian Women and Wayward Reading* joins a robust body of criticism on nineteenth-century women's reading practices (Kate Flint; Jacqueline Pearson; Catherine Golden; Jennifer Phegley) and deftly broadens its implications within nineteenth-century gender studies. Most significant to Knox's study of reading as identity exploration is the category of the "wayward reader": a strategically deviant reader who leverages women's assumed capacity for literary identification to mobilize discontent (14–15). Contrary to contemporary assumptions that women read passively and indulgently, Knox argues "that both fictional and real Victorian women readers exercised identification as a flexible capacity instead of an emotional compulsion" (3). Indeed, she maintains that fictional and historical women readers leveraged literary identification as a tactic of resistance.

<2>Over the course of six chapters, Knox examines narrative representations of wayward reading and asks how these texts invited extratextual action. Applying a usefully expansive definition of "reading," the study considers women's wayward relations with novels, theatricals, and telepathy. The opening chapter, "Masculine Identification and Marital Dissolution," demonstrates how historical women readers were encouraged to identify with male, fictional characters in order to bolster sympathy for their future husbands. Within this context, she argues that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) re-deploys women's masculine literary identification to grant Aurora's creative freedom. "*Aurora Leigh*," she writes, "promotes an emphatically *literary* rather than a marital or relational mode of female identification with masculinity" (26). Chapter Two, "Novels without Heroines: Sensation and Elective Identification," provokes histories of sensation fiction in its

argument that the cultural “crisis” engendered by sensation fiction was not one of moral depravity, but rather of women’s right to subjective choice. Focused on Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), *Aurora Floyd* (1863), and *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864), Knox contends that sensation fiction “refuses to fix the reader’s affinities” (51) and thereby encouraged active participation from its primarily female reading audience. The chapter concludes with a provocative link between sensation fiction and the nascent years of suffrage reform. Knox acknowledges that sensation novelists did not overtly engage with suffrage debates, but that in the late 1860s public discourse associated them as supposed infringements upon women’s acceptable sphere of action. Yet, Knox claims, these anxieties coincided with an alternative association between reading practices and political action: the freedom of choice within sensation fiction prompted women readers to “rehearse the process of selecting her aptest representative” (76).

<3>The third and fourth chapters depart from fiction and toward reading other forms of popular culture. Chapter Three, “Character Invasion and the Victorian Actress,” considers fictional and nonfictional depictions of the Victorian actress, and her identification with the characters she performs. Knox interweaves contemporary accounts of professional actresses with analyses of several fictional actresses, including Bianca in Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters* (1848); Vashti and Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853); Magdalen Vanstone in Wilkie Collins’s *No Name* (1862); and Alcharisi in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876). In a salient extension of the chapter’s argument that acting empowered, rather than dissolved, women’s identities, Knox traces the co-constitutive roles of actress, writer, and director in each text. Chapter Four, “Antipathetic Telepathy: Female Mediums and Reading the Enemy,” provides an engaging discussion of “brain reading,” or, telepathy. Women’s perceived sympathetic nature, Knox shows, framed an “essentially feminine receptivity to occult transmission” (98) whether victimized by mesmerists or possessed as mediums. Knox proposes an alternative perception of female telepathy that is on display in George Eliot’s novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859); Florence Marryat’s memoir, *There Is No Death* (1891); and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). In each of these texts, Knox argues that the female medium leverages her special access to the minds of others as a mode of self-defense. The wayward female medium exercises a “conscious and purposive power” (99) that, in fact, demonstrates self-possession rather than submission to possession.

<4>In the penultimate chapter, “‘The Valley of the Shadow of the Books’: The Morbidity of Female Detachment,” Knox turns the construction of the wayward reader on its head. The discussion neatly complements the preceding chapters in its argument that, by the *fin de siècle*, women’s professional pursuits as readers defied

an assumed feminine capacity for identification. As a result, however, “their status as women became questionable” (120). In George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Odd Women* (1893), Knox argues that professional women (namely, Marian Yule and Rhoda Nunn) tend to under-identify with literature and, by extension, are portrayed as emotionally and physically barren. In addition to the discussion of Gissing, Knox examines new women fiction by Charlotte Riddell, George Paston, and Mary Cholmondeley to show that each correlates women writers’ professional success with a compromised marriage or family. The chronological structure of the chapters, as a whole, reinforces Knox’s intriguing look forward toward “a Modernist detachment from gender itself” (145).

<5>Knox writes as a scholar-teacher in the final chapter, “The New Crises: Can We Teach Identification?” Gendered stereotypes of Victorian reading have a striking counterpart, she shows, in current concerns over boys’ presumed lack of interest in reading. What “was perceived as an overabundance in women is now seen as a deficit that disadvantages boys” (147). Knox reviews pedagogical responses that tend to emphasize “masculine” texts with which, it is presumed, male students will more readily identify. Knox articulates the biases inherent in these responses that perpetuate “the systematic patriarchal devaluation of anything feminized and the feminization of anything devalued” (148). Underpinning her own attention to fluid categories of gender, Knox adds that neither cisgender nor non-binary students benefit from broad assumptions about gendered reading preferences (149). Instead, she offers empirical studies of and pedagogical strategies for reading as a mode of identification. “Inspired by the conscious, deliberate practice of wayward reading” (159), Knox outlines active reading strategies that ask students to interrogate their spontaneous identifications, and to practice identification as a choice. It is a constructive application of the history that *Wayward Reading* traverses and, in its reflective deployment of the book’s topic, it models the dynamic intersections of teaching and research.

<6>*Victorian Women and Wayward Reading* integrates an impressive array of sources, subjects, and histories that make it of interest to many nineteenth-century scholars and students. In order to delineate the multiple practices and implications of wayward reading, Knox draws on literary texts, periodical essays, memoirs, drama, images, and she intersects with criticism ranging from reader response theory, to cognitive psychology, to pedagogy studies. At the same time, the book engages with a wide range of topics in Victorian studies, such as theatre, sensation fiction, and the professional female author. The broad research agenda enables Knox to skillfully close the gap between real and imagined reading practices, a methodological difficulty within many histories of reading. By closing this gap,

Knox confronts Victorians' essentialist categories of "woman," and carefully, conscientiously, and generatively provokes gendered constructions of reading, both historically and today.