

Writing Woman in Print and Cloth

Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism. Christine Bayles Kortsch. Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. 201 pp.

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<1> Christine Bayles Kortsch has written a thorough and fascinating study in *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism*. Kortsch posits in Chapter 1, "Writing in Fabric, Working in Print," that women exhibit "dual literacy" in both fashion and writing. Pointing out that women's education in the nineteenth century focused on "inert literacy" (3) and sewing, most women could, therefore, read print and "'dress culture' – that is, the interrelated skills of constructing and interpreting cloth and household textiles," including "not only the wearing, producing, purchasing, or embellishing of clothing and textiles, but also the regulating and interpreting of both women's and men's garments" (4). Since patriarchal culture belittles fashion as feminine, this type of literacy is often ignored. Thus, her goal is to reveal how "contemporary women writers – New Woman, popular, and socialist writers" practiced "'active' literacy" and in doing so "validated women's literacy in dress culture as a form of feminine knowledge, creativity, and power" (2). Kortsch is interested in "thickening" the conversation surrounding women who write with pens and needles, arguing that women's dual literacy was a source of empowerment and "authority in a patriarchal society" (13), "function[ing] simultaneously as an alternative discourse and a traditional one" (14). Her focus on women's education in sewing and reading complicates the era's grand narrative by tying them to pertinent late Victorian issues, such as women's literary production, the dress reform movement, the industrialization of textile labor, and social protest movements. Most importantly to feminist fashion scholars who are frustrated by the fractured and overly specialized nature of most texts on clothing, Kortsch compiles a comprehensive overview of relevant research by scholars writing on feminism, material culture, semiotic systems, power systems, and sexuality.

<2> In Chapter 2, "The Needle Dipped in Blood," Kortsch explores how New Woman writers struggled with their understanding of sewing as both artistic potential (personal and literary production) and symbol of female oppression (proper femininity in a patriarchal culture and exploited labor). As education underwent a major overhaul in the nineteenth century, most women, nevertheless, continued to be taught plain (basic sewing) and fancy (embroidery) needlework. Leaving behind the impact of the textile factory, Kortsch provides a complex picture of how the sewing machine, paper patterns, advertising, ready-to-wear clothing, and department

stores impacted women's relationship to and expression through fashion, increasing material consumption while paradoxically decreasing home production of clothing. As Kortsch points out "[n]o matter who was to blame for the vagaries of fashion, its production depended on the unregulated labor of working-class women and on the disposable time and income of middle and upper-class women" (39). She argues that debates surrounding women's education in sewing reflected an unease with women's other mode of production: literature. Focusing on Olive Schreiner's unfinished and posthumously published *From Man to Man, or, Perhaps Only* (1926), Kortsch posits that the narrative's sisters, Rebekah and Bertie, illustrate how "sewing fills more than merely the functional and metaphorical purpose of creating an opportunity for conversation ... ; it also provides a basis of knowledge by which women read each other" (46), suggesting that individual pieces of gossip – which at first seem like nothing, similar to little swatches of cloth – are often stitched together to create an "undeniable" "garment" (46). Kortsch furthermore argues that *From Man to Man* "demonstrates that dual literacy did not provide homogeneous experiences for women writers or readers. Rather, like any language system, dual literacy could be understood and utilized in a variety of ways, many of them deeply conflicting" (53).

<3> In perhaps her most compelling chapter, "Fashioning Women: The Victorian Corset," Kortsch argues that "[i]n the Victorian and early Edwardian periods, the primary erogenous zone of the female torso was the waist" (61), providing a historical overview and social analysis of the corset's many modifications and significations. She compares the image of the corseted torso to the natural figure preferred by the contemporaneous yet contradictory dress reform movement, which promoted handmade, natural clothing, requiring little or no corsetry. Throughout the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries – but especially the 1880s – debates focused on the impact of different types of corsetry – including tight-lacing – on women's moral, physical, mental, democratic, and sartorial health. Kortsch delves into the corset's contradictory history, such as dress reformers adopting "healthy" corsets, and Edwardians lacing tighter than ever after decades of feminist reform. This background information informs her analysis of Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). Then, returning to Schreiner's *From Man to Man*, Kortsch posits that both Grand and Schreiner recognized that "too much radicalism in dress might compromise readers' acceptance of or admiration for the heroines. Both authors avoid labeling their character of dress reformers or aesthetes, and they also emphasize the traditional femininity of their protagonists" (100).

<4> In Chapter 4, "Art's Labor Lost: Haunting the Dress Shop," Kortsch focuses her analysis on the contradiction that Margaret Oliphant, a well-known opponent of the sewing trades' exploitation of needlewomen, also wrote *Kirsteen: The Story of a Scotch Family Seventy Years Ago* (1890). The novel is a sympathetic tale of a woman who excels as a dressmaker, and "in the process ... becomes an artist" (105). Refusing to tackle whether or not Oliphant was a feminist, Kortsch instead shows how the concept of "dual literacy" informs Oliphant's representation of dress culture. For example, the eponymous character uses her own hair to sew the symbol of her affection (her lover's initials) into a handkerchief, exploiting this properly feminine form of expression to communicate improper sexual desire. After her lover dies, Kirsteen does not marry another; instead she pursues a career in dressmaking, which she eventually builds into her own successful business. Ultimately, Kortsch argues that Oliphant "offers a vision of female leadership that is at once benevolent and unregulated" (116), while simultaneously avoiding the popular idea that dressmaking leads to sexual promiscuity. Turning her attention to Ella

Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Kortsch observes that the protagonist, an upper middle-class woman writer, serves as an example of how authors' claims to be advocating for working-class women are troubled by the fact that they profit from spying on and then analyzing working-class women's clothing. Ultimately, Kortsch believes Dixon and Oliphant engaged with "complicated issues of women's class, sexuality, and professionalism" and "shared an ambivalence about women's sewing and the extent to which it could function as art or labor" (124).

<5> In Chapter 5, "Beautiful Revolution: New Women Sew a New World," Kortsch recounts how, beginning in the 1880s, art embroidery replaced Berlin wool-work, eventually becoming associated with socialism, aestheticism, and philanthropy. Analyzing Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* (1897), Kortsch contends that Beth combines her education in abstract thought and the creation of nice clothes with her experiences cross-dressing and "transgressing dress codes" (148) to free herself – through her ability to do art embroidery and write – first from an oppressive background and finally from an unhappy marriage. Next focusing on *The Image-Breakers* (1900), Kortsch argues that Gertrude Dix "criticizes the socialist project that fails to take into account working- and lower-middle-class women's need and desire to work professionally" (172). By contextualizing the novels' plots with historical information on aestheticism, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and art embroidery, Kortsch shows that "dress culture can provide women with financial independence, creative expression, a way to care for the needy, and social resistance. And in both novels, the most effective social activists are those who use dress culture to fashion an authentic self" (142). While Kortsch romanticizes how "[s]ewing and dressing a self becomes a way to sew and dress a better world, one that is not only more just, but more beautiful" (142), she also recognizes that the authors' socialist and revolutionary didacticism is muddled by conservative nostalgia, revealing how class-based discourses create contradictory messages about the proper means for women to utilize sewing and writing to achieve progressive goals.

<6> Kortsch skillfully integrates and explains a wide range of sources – historical, critical, and theoretical – that contextualize and inform her close readings of both novels and a select group of contemporary photographs, advertisements, and cartoons. However, the long plot summaries that highlight how authors and characters write with both pen and needle – while helpful in illustrating the import of dress culture to understanding the texts – are so lengthy as to alienate readers who are either familiar or unfamiliar with the novels. This problem is most evident in Chapters 4 and 5, which emphasize textual detail over historical context. Nevertheless, her text is an engaging read with an extensive – if not exhaustive – bibliography, making it a valuable resource for anyone interested in late Victorian women's fiction – especially New Woman fiction – fashion, and feminism. In writing *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction*, Kortsch has, without a doubt, enriched discussions of the *künstlerroman* genre by engaging seriously with women's work as artistic production, not only in print but also in cloth.