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Affairs of State: Aristocratic Women and the Politics of Influence

Aristocratic Women and the Literary Nation, 1832-1867. Muireann Ó'Cinnéide. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 241 pp.

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<1> Early in *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf offers a contemptuous précis of the case against female suffrage, particularly the notion that women's "indirect influence" is more powerful than any more overt political power. Noting that such influence "would seem to be only fully effective when combined with rank, wealth and great houses," she goes on to disavow it in the strongest terms: "If such is the real nature of [women's] influence ... it is either beyond our reach, for many of us are plain, poor and old; or beneath our contempt, for many of us would prefer to call ourselves prostitutes simply and to take our stand openly under the lamps of Piccadilly Circus rather than use it."(1) In *Aristocratic Women and the Literary Nation, 1832-1867*, Muireann Ó'Cinnéide offers an account of female power in the world of "rank, wealth and great houses" that seems, at first, not far removed from the patriarchal construct Woolf subjects to such withering scorn. However, Ó'Cinnéide's reading of privileged women's access to political clout reintroduces nuances that Woolf, with her rather different agenda, took delight in stripping away. In effect, Ó'Cinnéide argues that we should reassess the nature and dimensions of the power aristocratic women writers of the early- to mid-Victorian era might access by virtue of their social status and political connections. *Pace* Woolf, Ó'Cinnéide finds that women played key roles in the construction of what she terms "the literary nation." She defines this imagined community, modeled on Benedict Anderson's influential construct, in two ways: first as the "imagined nation as represented in literature" and next as "the sense of the nation itself as shaped by literature" (13).

<2> Generous in its scope, the monograph offers a wide-ranging and consistently engaging survey of modes of political involvement broadly defined; it reconsiders little-read genres, delves into case histories of individual women, reviews literary representations of the political hostess, and analyzes upper-class women's rhetoric in a range of prose genres. In the process, it focuses at least as much on the issue of aristocratic women's literary and social authority as on their role in shaping "the literary nation." While Ó'Cinnéide's title suggests this phrase as the project's organizing figure, I found the final chapter heading, which I've borrowed for this review, a more apt description of the book's center of gravity. "Affairs of State: Aristocratic Women and the Politics of Influence" captures the monograph's focus on aristocratic women's ability to influence

the political process indirectly via their social contacts with powerful men. It also captures the price they so often paid for that influence, as their ability — real and perceived — to affect the political process generated intense anxiety that often took the form of attacks on their sexual morality or social propriety.

<3> The central dilemma this monograph explores, then, is how aristocratic women might capitalize on the prestige conferred by rank while avoiding the censure that increasingly came attached to such status during the era of Reform. Ó'Cinnéide demonstrates how the particulars of this tricky balancing act differed for memoirists, early writers of silver fork fiction, editors of fashionable "annuals," polemical pamphleteers, authors embedding experiences from their own lives in autobiographical fiction, and upper-class hostesses seeking to influence the political process. But the fundamental question Ó'Cinnéide explores — namely, how to exploit social status without being condemned for doing so — haunts all of the women writers she considers here.

<4> The first half of the book is organized by genre, devoting a chapter apiece to aristocratic women's life writing; so-called "silver fork" or "fashionable" fiction; and a closer investigation of what George Eliot so memorably termed "silly novels by lady novelists." These three chapters are gathered under the rubric "Class and Authorship," and together they consider women writers' strategic invocation of upper-class status as a way to legitimate their forays into authorship. They also invite us to reconsider what Lawrence Poston has termed the "strange hiatus in poetry and fiction between about 1825 and 1840."(2) While Poston attributes this gap to "the displacement of works of the imagination by the all-consuming task of Reform" (5), Ó'Cinnéide implicitly questions whether such a hiatus occurred. Reminding us of the wealth of little-read genres that proliferated in the early Victorian era, she mounts absorbing investigations of texts that never made it into the Victorian canon. For instance, she makes a compelling case for reconsidering silver fork fiction — so often dismissed as frivolous — as a genre that grapples with reform-era upheaval. These texts, she contends, are not just contemporaneous with but reflective of the era of Reform. Moreover, she finds these novels of fashionable life proto-Victorian in their emphasis on moral reform: for Ó'Cinnéide, they are neither anomalous misfits nor Regency throwbacks; instead, they pave the way for the very different animal thought of today as "the" Victorian novel.

<5> The second half of the monograph, "Writing the Nation State," turns first to two exemplary figures, Rosina Bulwer Lytton and Caroline Norton, offering extended considerations of their lives and works. Similarly tainted by scandalous separations from their husbands and similarly inclined to defend themselves and attack their spouses with their pens, these women figure in Ó'Cinnéide's account as illustrations of the uses and limitations of an aristocratic identity. Each woman, Ó'Cinnéide shows us, not only insisted on her aristocratic identity, but needed to insist on it precisely because her claim to such an identity was partial and compromised. Why, she asks, was one woman an effective political actor while the other was not?

<6> Bulwer Lytton attacked her estranged husband, who briefly succeeded in having her confined in an asylum after she publicly castigated him during a parliamentary campaign event, in thinly-disguised *romans-à-clef* and autobiographical pamphlets; she ultimately changed no

laws and wore out the public's ear and patience with the insistently personal nature of her complaints. In Ó'Cinnéide's reading, Bulwer Lytton "does not really position herself consistently as the spokesperson for other sufferers: for her, autobiography remains a highly personalized genre. Its function is to tell *her* story" (105). In contrast, Caroline Norton, whose husband deprived her of access to her three sons when he accused her of adultery with Lord Melbourne — then Prime Minister of England — successfully positioned her personal ordeal as an object lesson in women's dispossession more generally. Her pamphlets on child custody and married women's legal standing, as well as her ability to network with influential upper-class men, were instrumental in changing laws that materially affected women's legal position in England. I read Ó'Cinnéide's arguments about each woman with fascinated attention — her account of their life stories and her analyses of their rhetorical strategies are riveting — but I was finally unsure of the extent to which either woman's life or works form a useful basis for larger claims about aristocratic women's role in the Victorian political scene (particularly given Ó'Cinnéide's own caveats that each woman's claim to aristocratic status was somewhat tenuous and that Bulwer Lytton herself insisted on the "personalized" nature of her writing).

<7> The Victorian appetite for stories about Society that Ó'Cinnéide describes — and the public's concomitant penchant for passing punitive judgment on the objects of its fascinated attention — is familiar today, fed by the pages of *Us* and *People*. Indeed, Ó'Cinnéide's account of Victorian versions of lifestyles of the rich and famous might just as aptly be applied to those magazines, or to celebrity-watcher websites like tmz.com; both then and now, such accounts "alternate between moralising on the folly and corruption of high society, and ... pleasurable reveling in the accoutrements ... of such society" (48). And then as now, there is room for considerable debate about the extent to which notable figures can control the terms in which they are read, exploiting their fame for their own purposes. This question is central to Ó'Cinnéide's argument, and her thoughtful answers make absorbing reading.

<8> As the monograph pursues questions about the perquisites and pitfalls of upper-class status for women, it often roams rather far afield, leaving questions of literary nationhood behind. However, these excursions take us into some fascinating byways, and the book would have been poorer without them. Its measured reconsideration of silver fork fiction and its thorough review of largely unread "silly novels" by aristocratic women are among the book's strongest sections; they mount a persuasive case for reassessing these neglected genres and thus make a valuable contribution to the increasingly detailed history of the Victorian novel. *Aristocratic Women and the Literary Nation* will be of particular interest to feminist critics, but it is well worth investigating by all those who study Victorian prose.

Endnotes

(1)Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966) 14-15.(^)

(2)Lawrence Poston, "1832," *A Companion to Victorian Literature & Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999) 5.(^)