

Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-521-12885-8
Reviewed by: Leya Edelstein, Vanderbilt University

Other books mentioned in this essay: *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, by Elizabeth Ladenson; *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences*, by Bernard Lightman; and *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment*, by Jessica Riskin

Lord Campbell once insisted that The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 was "...intended to apply exclusively to works written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth, and of a nature calculated to shock the common feelings of decency in any well-regulated mind."¹ However, obscenity wouldn't be legally defined until the 1868 case of *Regina v. Hicklin*, at which time Sir Alexander Cockburn would state that the "test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged...is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort might fall."² Of course, the works brought to trial thereafter were wide-ranging in medium and collectively uncorrelated in matters of context, blasphemy, innuendo, or fact. Many scholarly works such as Bernard Lightman's *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences*, and Jessica Riskin's *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* analyze how The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 coupled with the popular boundaries of Victorian respectability challenged the publication of factual scientific resources or how the same act threatened the publication of literary aesthetic masterpieces. But in *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability*, Gowan Dawson bravely does both with irrefutable evidence, biographical details, and historical contingency.

This powerful work stands out amongst its field through Dawson's interdisciplinary expertise (in both law and literature) and thorough insight into the most pressing matters surrounding cases of obscenity in the Victorian era. Dawson avoids broadly connecting the fields of science and literature by narrowing his study of The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 and Victorian respectability towards a particular parallel in chapter two, focusing on Charles Darwin, Algernon Charles Swinburne and sexualized responses to evolution. In his introduction, he notes the fears Victorians inherently held in the face of Darwin's *Descent of Man*, published in 1871, but in his second chapter that he elaborates on both the 19th century's popularly perceived risks of allowing arguably "suggestive" scientific language to be widely available for mass consumption, and how these fears were undoubtedly reflected in the Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Songs Before the Sunrise*. He doesn't merely acknowledge the concurrent issues facing both empirical and aesthetic literature in the age of Victorian discretion, however, he also critically assesses the ways in which the two types of publications were inherently connected: "Such invidious parallels are well known to historians, but what has not previously been noted is that the delayed publication of the *Descent* also

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A679016>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A679016>

coincided with the release of Algernon Charles Swinburne's latest collection of verse, *Songs Before the Sunrise*"(28).

Dawson scrupulously details the multitude of ways in which the unfavorable reviews of both works were connected in light of Victorian respectability, more specifically highlighting the questions of language and morality that threatened both works: "The abnegation of morality and conscience seemingly exhibited in Swinburne's perverted poems threatened exactly the same destructive consequences as Darwin's evolutionary account of morality..." (46). Likewise, he later emphasizes an oft-overlooked aspect of Darwin's *Decent of Man*, notably Darwin's references to Alfred Tennyson's poetry. He further connects Darwinian science and aesthetics by explaining the popular reactions towards various satirical Darwinian images and the questionable role into which he placed women throughout *Decent of Man*: "...Masculine sexual jealousy, as Darwin had suggested in the original version of the decent, would, as an inevitable consequence of the male's own desire for an exclusive sexual relationship, also 'lead to the inculcation of female virtue', which would eventually even 'spread to unmarried females' and form the basis of the civilized 'self-regarding virtues' of feminine 'chastity' and celibacy'" (76). This emphasis on the role of women as it relates to obscenity is discussed in the excellent work by Elizabeth Ladenson called *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, which focuses on literary books on trial and draws attention to influential fictional roles of female characters in the trial regarding *Madame Bovary*. "Women, it is clear, posed the major problem in terms of the readership of novels, because of the idea that women in general, like the newly literate working classes, were unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. This is also precisely Emma Bovary's problem, which is why the trial of *Madame Bovary* provides such an exemplary case in terms of the dangers of literature" (11).

Gowan Dawson's work presents readers with yet another important parallel between purportedly threatening literary works and scientific discourse as they relate to the role of women in the 19th century by leading the reader to wonder: was the newly hypothesized evolutionary role of women thought to be more threatening to society as it was laden with empiricism and read by men upholding Victorian notions of female sexuality, or were the women in novels such as *Madame Bovary* perceived as more threatening because they were situated inside fictionalized plots available for consumption by any literate individual? Ladenson notes that Flaubert himself addressed this question in his 1857 trial, and answers can only be surmised after a thorough understanding of both context and intent as they relate to obscenity, which Dawson certainly provides later in his text. In the second chapter, Dawson argues that language, morality, and sexual selection were equally threatening to Victorian codes of decency through both scientific enlightenment texts and objectionable literature: while literary works illustrated or eluded to indecency, Darwinian theories supposedly encouraged it by positioning its cause within nature.

Dawson critically evaluates divided attitudes in Victorian freethought as well as matters of context and intent as they relate to obscenity in his fourth chapter, on "Darwinism, Victorian freethought and the Obscene Publications act" therein, he resists a teleological approach, choosing instead to present a range of attitudes regarding obscenity amidst Victorian freethinkers and differing opinions within the contemporary scientific community: "Lord Campbell's endeavors in the mid-1850s to both modernize and

strengthen the law on obscenity, which were assisted by evidence provided by the Vice Society, were actually commended by several medical and scientific commentators, who expressed concern at the debilitating physiological effects of an addiction to pornography” (122). This point is even more interesting in the face of Lord Campbell’s explanation of The Obscene Publications Act of 1957, which he claimed, “...intended to apply exclusively to works written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth, and of a nature calculated to shock the common feelings of decency in any well-regulated mind”.³

Though contemporary members of the scientific community may have supported Lord Campbell’s efforts to mediate obscene material, Dawson notes that their concerns were “physiological” rather than “moral” or “psychological” in nature. He also addresses the aforementioned questions of both context and intent as they relate to obscenity in the face of Victorian discretion. The issue of context after The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 was perhaps one of the most difficult to reconcile between the scientific enlightenment and new legalities rooted in Victorian traditions: “While descriptions and illustrations of the intimate details of human anatomy or physiology were obviously necessary to the advancement of science and the practice of medicine, early 19th century obscenity legislation, like that covering blasphemy, meant that even they, when excerpted and taken out of their customary context, could not be exempted entirely from potential criminality” (121). This issue of context and scientific works was further complicated by the concern of intent, which he presents as a multifaceted, convoluted layer in The Obscene Publications Act of 1857.

In regards to the aforementioned question of context, the concern of intent lies in the hands of the literate: the purpose of questionably indecent illustrations in scientific works could be both pragmatic and educational, but the fear was that they could also be immorally lustfully viewed out of context. Additionally, according to Lord Chief Justice, Sir Alexander Cockburn, the concern of intent applied to authors of objectionable works after *Regina v. Hicklin* in 1868. In *Dirt for Art’s Sake*, Ladenson quotes Baudelaire, brought to trial only a few years earlier for *Les Fleurs De Mal*, stating that “this book was not written for my wives, my daughters, or sisters; nor for my neighbor’s wives, daughters or sisters. I leave that task to those interested in confusing virtuous acts with beautiful language” (57). Finally, Dawson explains that Lord Campbell claimed that the concern of intent also lied in the aims and adaptations of the act itself: “The new legislation was aimed principally at cheap and mass-produced publications, which, Campbell claimed, were proliferating in modern urban culture...it was considered that its implementation could only benefit more legitimate forms of publishing like science and medicine.” (122) Dawson’s assertions in this particular chapter, on ‘Darwinism, Victorian freethought and the Obscene Publications Act’, are perhaps easier to compare to those made in other publications within this field, but the strength of his thesis and the depth he provides are certainly noteworthy.

In chapters three, five, and six, Dawson critically portrays the legacies of John Tyndall, Walter Pater, William Kingdon Clifford, T.H. Huxley, and Henry Maudsley, which brings his analysis to another level. An individual without a prior academic background in all of the antecedent works that relate to Dawson’s argument might find

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A679016>

his book somewhat dense, however, for the knowledgeable reader interested in how the scientific community was affected by Victorian codes of decency, how its struggles mirrored those faced by the publishers and authors of literary works, and how an in-depth historiography could answer pressing questions in regards to 19th century obscenity laws, Dawson's newest publication deserves the utmost esteem and recommendation.

Leya Edelstein, Vanderbilt University
leya.e.edelstein@vanderbilt.edu

Bibliography:

Dawson, Gowan. Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

H2g2. BBC February 15, 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A679016>

Ladenson, Elizabeth. Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.