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Watching Hannah: Sexuality, Horror and Bodily De-formation in Victorian England

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In 1854, Arthur Munby (1828-1910), civil servant, writer and ?connoisseur of working class women?, met Hannah Cullwick, a servant, who became the object of a clandestine courtship and then a secret marriage. Their affair and marriage remained hidden from Munby?s friends and associates, and although evidence suggests that they never had sex, their relationship was highly sexual and provided an arena for Munby to realise his fetishistic desires about working women. Munby was fascinated by the bodies of working women, intrigued by the ways in which they invoked and flouted the middle-class feminine ideal, by that ?mixture of manly frankness and woman delicacy?. He was attracted to Cullwick?s masculine femininity, her brawn and size, her dirty work and by what he saw as her concealed lady-like qualities, that for him hid a noble femininity. The relationship was sado-masochistic and included an element of theatre and masquerade. Even after the marriage, Cullwick was expected to carry out the duties of a servant and produce accounts of her daily degradation; acting as a charwoman and then as an agricultural worker when they moved to Shropshire. Only occasionally did they go away as man and wife and during this time Cullwick was expected to play the lady. Munby saw their relationship as an experiment in which to indulge his obsessions and act out roles; Cullwick did not envisage their relationship taking the form that it did, but saw herself as a ?slave? to love. First as a hidden affair, then as a clandestine marriage, and finally as a ?commuting? marriage (in some ways familiar to modern long-distance relationships), Munby and Cullwick failed to

conform to stereotypes of Victorian matrimony or sexuality. But as Reay suggests in *Watching Hannah* there is more than one reading.

On the surface, the relationship between Munby and Cullwick provides the focus for *Watching Hannah*. It offers a rich and compelling insight into an unconventional relationship that failed to conform to social norms. Reay?s material is intrinsically fascinating and Munby?s obsessions do make absorbing, if uncomfortable reading, especially when Reay tackles Munby?s fascination with noseless women (chapter 2). However, as *Watching Hannah* illustrates, far more can be read into Munby?s obsessions. Reay offers an exploration of Munby?s fascinations, his pleasures and his cruelties, but at no point does he attempt to downplay Munby?s attraction to ?thrilling awfulness? or to redeem him. *Watching Hannah* describes a man who was a ?master of early fetishism, sadomasochism and voyeurism? (p. 10) but, as Reay effectively argues, Munby can also tell us much about Victorian attitudes to femininity. Against the backdrop of Munby?s sadomasochistic relationship with Cullwick, *Watching Hannah* is a study of voyeurism and fetishism, of Victorian male desires and not simply a book about one often hidden aspect of the sexual culture of late nineteenth-century England. Through Munby?s work, writings and photographs the reader is offered an insight into a ?fetishized endorsement of the subverted ideal? of Victorian femininity.

Reay is not the first historian to address Munby?s work or obsessions. His diaries, letters and surviving photographic collection have been used (or ?mined? as Reay puts it) to explore representations of Victorian working women (1); the interactions between sex and gender (2); and as a documentary source for the life and attitudes of a domestic servant.(3) Munby has also been subject to feminist re-readings of the bourgeois white male gaze (4) and as a commentary on the connections between race and empire in private desires (5). These multiple readings of Munby?s desires find expression in *Watching Hannah*. What Reay sets out to provide is a new study that addresses the themes raised by the existing historiography but which adds new layers of meaning. In doing so, the book re-examines Munby and his fascination with working class and disfigured women. Rich in detail (sometimes there is too much) and superbly illustrated, *Watching Hannah* draws heavily on Munby?s diaries, letters, poems, sketches and photographs as well as Cullwick?s letters and diaries. Sadly, some of these have been lost or removed before entering the archive and Reay acknowledges that there are gaps in the material, especially relating to the period when Munby and Cullwick lived together. In looking at this material, Reay presents more than a straightforward account of Munby and eschews biography, even if much of the book concentrates on recounting and reconstructing Munby?s obsessions. In the process, *Watching Hannah* has new ?stories? (p. 10) to tell, but stories that are firmly located in the context of Victorian sexuality and middle-class notions of femininity.

Unlike Allen (6), Reay sees Munby as more than an English *flâneur*. Although this aspect of Munby?s pleasure at observing the city and its working female inhabitants is not overlooked, Reay uses Munby as a filter to grapple with the complexities of Victorian sexuality and notions of femininity, with his collections of working women forming an ?other?, which for Reay throws light on conventional discourses. As Reay explains at the start of the book, ?Munby?s world is inexplicable without the ideological framework of the culture of Victorian femininity? (p. 16). *Watching Hannah* shows how Munby?s examples of femininity should be seen as a counterpoint and back-handed compliment to traditional stereotypes of femininity associated with Ruskin?s image of delicate beauty and lithe airy shapes ?of the true lady?. However, Reay is careful not to cast Munby as a lone figure, but as a man of his time, so that his fantasies offer a way of revealing wider male preoccupations with femininity, the body, deformity and masculinity.

Munby spent his adult life savouring the cross-currents and contradictions of Victorian notions of gender and class. He was a compulsive voyeur, trailing and talking to women both in towns and cities and in the countryside. However, as Reay so deftly shows, Munby was no mere distanced viewer with a ?compassionate feeling for working women?. He made a habit of seeking out their histories, which he meticulously recorded and recreated. Reay argues that most of Munby?s encounters were cynical and detached, with Munby seeing his collections of working women as objects of amusement. Photography was central to his interaction, providing the historian with a rich collection of images that depict the dress and appearance of working women from milkmaids to servants to trapeze artists and pit-workers. Although less attempt is made to discuss the multiple meanings of Munby?s photographic collection, Reay does effectively

demonstrate how Munby?s interest was not just to chronicle. His deliberate encounters were a means of indulging his belief about the compatibility between femininity and hard labour. There can be no doubt from *Watching Hannah* that Munby was aroused by these encounters, which at points became fantasies in themselves.

Munby?s fetishistic interests were not limited to masculine women or their hard-working hands. Munby was also fascinated by bodily de-formation, and in particular noseless women. To illustrate this, Reay describes Munby?s relationship with Harriet Langdon, an ?erect and elegant? (p. 40) woman whose face was disfigured by lupus. For Reay this relationship typified Munby?s voyeurism and the dependence he fostered with the women he encountered. He sees Munby?s interest in the context of physiognomy and nasology, and as a vivid example of Victorian gothic horror. It is suggested that these noseless women offered a way of defining femininity by representing its opposite, rather than providing a commentary on attitudes to physical deformity or the prevalence of disfiguring illness. Here Munby is merely engaging ?in a more fetishistic pursuit of common cultural markers?, but little evidence is provided to support this claim beyond the fascination and excitement he felt. Although the polarity between deformity and (feminine) perfection formed a leitmotif in Victorian horror literature, while the nose was used to reinforce notions about the ideal woman, Munby?s interest can be seen in another context. It can also be interpreted as part of the contemporary fascination with freaks, the disordered body and deformity so ably discussed by Roy Porter in another book in the same series (7) ? points that Reay does not acknowledge.

From the start, Reay asserts that it is a mistake to read Munby?s all too probable virginity as a lack of interest in sex. Many of the encounters addressed in *Watching Hannah* are highly sexualised and Reay devotes part of the penultimate chapter in dismissing the idea that Munby may have been homosexual. Links are made between Munby and the author of *My Secret Life*, with Reay arguing that both saw women in similar, sexualised ways. The sexualised nature of Munby?s interactions is clearest in Reay?s discussion of Munby's and Cullwick?s relationship, which is examined in meticulous and graphic detail. Reay suggests that it embodied notions of cerebral lechery and the ideal of male continence that was characteristic of Munby?s age and class. However, the initial discussion of the relationship is one-dimensional, mediated through Munby?s obsessions, his interest in domination, servitude and masquerade. Reay argues that Munby?s marriage was an attempt to create the embodiment of his fantasy woman and his fascination with the notion of a degraded exterior and noble interior. He also puts forward the view that Cullwick was lonely during the ?commuting? stage of their marriage and argues that Munby himself was at times troubled by the nature of their relationship. Little impression is given that she was a willing participant who derived pleasure from her role. This comes later in the study, when Reay demonstrates how Cullwick was drawn into the relationship, and how it met her desire to be a servant to love and her apparent love of hard work. With *Watching Hannah* focusing on Munby, what is missing from the discussion of his relationship with Cullwick are her reactions to his voyeurism and interest in other women. Did she know or care? Are there other readings of her diaries?

The relationship between Munby and Cullwick serves to highlight the main themes in *Watching Hannah*, which are returned to again and again during the course of the study. Throughout, Reay looks for signs in Munby?s work that help define the Victorian approach to femininity, given Munby?s interest in seeking out its ?counterpoints? (p. 96). Here dirt becomes a form of disfigurement; clothing a means of unsexing women. Reay uses this interest to discuss notions of gender hybridity, but less is said about how other contemporaries ?saw? working women and whether they interpreted them as masculine. Given the rich contemporary debate about the human types associated with the Victorian city and concerns about health and the body, this seems strange. Reay also stresses how Munby?s narratives and interactions with working women and with Cullwick offer opportunities for Munby to return to his favourite themes of dominance and submission. Other themes are touched upon: the place of the rural in English ideology, which Reay suggests Munby tried to recreate when he and Cullwick moved to Shropshire; and the role of ritual in Victorian relationships. Although Reay is keen to point out that Munby?s collecting of urban working women was by no means unusual ? it was present in the work of Dickens, Mayhew and other social investigators ? this aspect is only touched upon in passing. The similar sexual subjects present in social investigations of the

nineteenth century city are alluded to but not explored. This would provide a fascinating further dimension and reinforce the central thesis of *Watching Hannah*, that Munby should be seen as a man of his time. Reay also highlights Munby?s attraction to nobility through servitude, but says little about the role played by work in Victorian society. Much is made of how Munby?s relationship with Cullwick crossed class boundaries, but notions of class and what they meant to Victorian society are not addressed. This leaves questions unanswered about the wider context of master and servant relationships at a time when novelists and social commentators were pointing to the corruption and abuse of servants that could be present in middle-class homes.

In suggesting that Munby?s sexuality should be read not so much as deviant pathology but as an extreme version of the kind of self-denial and controlled heterosexuality of Victorian middle-class masculinity, Reay offers a persuasive account of Munby?s significance for understanding latenineteenth-century notions of gender. In *Watching Hannah*, Munby comes to represent the complexity of Victorian sexuality and its polymorphous nature. It reminds us that there is far more to Victorian sexuality than the common stereotypes; that transgressiveness, voyeuristic interest in pain and suffering, sadomasochism, and a fascination with disfigurement were very much a part of the Victorian sexual world. By setting out a detailed and sensitive study, Reay adds a further level of reading to Munby and his obsessions which serves to disrupt and explore nineteenth-century male ideals of femininity.

Notes

1. M. Hiley, *Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life* (David R. Godine; Boston, 1979); A. V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (Croom Helm; London, 1980).Back to (1)
2. L. Davidoff, ?Class and gender in Victorian England?, *Feminist Studies*, 5 (1979), 87-141.Back to (2)
3. L. Stanley, ed., *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant* (Rutgers University Press; New Brunswick, N.J., 1984).Back to (3)
4. G. Pollock, ?The dangers of proximity: the spaces of sexuality and surveillance in word and image?, *Discourse*, 16 (1993-4), 3-50.Back to (4)
5. G. Pollock, ?"With My Own Eyes": fetishism, the labouring body and the colour of its sex?, *Art History*, 17 (1994), 342-82; A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (Routledge; London, 1995).Back to (5)
6. R. Allen, ?Munby reappraised: the diary of an English flaneur?, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 5 (2000), 260-86.Back to (6)
7. Roy Porter, *Bodies Politic: Disease, Death and Doctors in Britain 1650-1900* (Reaktion; London, 2001).Back to (7)

Barry Reay is grateful to Keir Waddington for his review and does not wish to comment further.

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