

Beatrice Laurent, *Water and Women in the Victorian Imagination*

Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021

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As argued in the title of Holly Case's 2020 book, the European nineteenth century was above all an *Age of Questions*. That is to say that the public sphere of the post-Napoleonic era, dominated by an increasingly politicised press, expanding franchise, and culture of empirical enquiry, was increasingly defined by cultural problems to be solved and queries that called out for resolution.

In this stimulating and wide-ranging new work of art history and literary criticism, Beatrice Laurent does something highly interesting and original with these this age of questions. She selects perhaps the most familiar issue of the age, "The Woman Question," and pairs it with a far less obvious issue of the age, "The Water Question."

By putting these two questions together, and by tracing their fascinating overlaps across British painting, sculpture, poetry, fiction, scientific texts, philosophy, and medical writings, she offers a suggestive and often unexpected history of Anglophone ideas.

Laurent's guiding concept is that of the "complex," understood as "the junction where scientific, cultural and literary and artistic interests converge at a particular moment" (65). This approach continues in the vein of her previous work on the complex of the "sleeping beauty," and just as in that previous book, the interdisciplinary commitments and catholic frame of reference allow her to weave together a highly original set of associations.

The discursive affinities between women and water became so ubiquitous during the period, Laurent maintains, that "to speak of one was to speak of the other" (3). This pairing brought a range of themes into play. Where women and water meet, dualities of solidity and liquidity; stability and flux; fertility and health versus flows of disease; cure versus poison seep insistently through the age. The idea of water, the book argues, became gendered at the same time as women were perceived and made to adopt, fluid qualities, such as adaptability, or intuitiveness. A series of patriarchal assumptions supposedly supported by female propensity for producing liquid in form of tears, menstrual blood, amniotic waters, milk. Wells, rivers, seas, shipwrecks, the figures of mermaids, sirens, drowned women are all shown to figure as part of a complex cultural conversation about gender roles, the meanings of hygiene and the health of democracy.

With such rich—dare we say deep?—material at her disposal, Laurent guides us through the “Water-Woman complex” with flair and confidence, exploring how the British people related to the aquatic element in the nineteenth century. The book’s self-consciously new historicist approach places an array of texts, images, artefacts and documents together in non-hierarchical fashion. The book is particularly effective where the analysis brings scientific sources into dialogue with cultural and religious representations. In doing so, Laurent places herself in the lineage of Gillian Beer to George Landow, and uses this cross-disciplinary framework to make a series of convincing arguments.

The opening chapter, for example, opens with a discussion of the theological context of water as image of primeval ecosystem, and the work of the seventeenth century theologian Thomas Burnett. This deft discussion of cosmologies and prevailing ideas about the origin of water shows how the “Water-Woman” speculations of natural science were often as culturally loaded as those of notionally less empirical cultural discourses. Similarly, the chapter on national identity and the rise of hydropathy shows how water cure theories can be seen as part of a broader debate over femininity and virginity. Along the way, Laurent takes us on an engaging tour from the heyday of the Ben Rhydding spa of Yorkshire, the work of William Morris, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Thomas Stothard.

The strongest chapter focuses on the moment where the water-woman complex came to its head, as the second half of the nineteenth century began. This is where the book’s argument reaches to its strongest point, and the virtues of Laurent’s approach are at their clearest. This chapter explores the symbolism of drowned, suicidal and hysterical women, and draws in the complex allegory of water as looking glass, and works such as Charles Allston Collins’s *Convent Thoughts* (1850), John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851) and the poetry of Christina Rossetti. Crucially, these artefacts are placed in dialogue with the crisis surrounding pollution in the River Thames, and the ideas about stagnancy, regression and pollution.

Water has the tendency to leak into everything. Laurent’s sharp cultural eye sees it at work in so many discourses and spheres and is eager to bring it into her discussion. The result at times can be overwhelming, since the book’s voracious desire for completeness means that the discussion at times floats between fascinating artefact and fascinating artefact without truly plumbing the depths. There was so much that could be said about each of these fascinating moments and connections, and it would have been engrossing to hear Laurent reflect on some of the nuances that remain unpacked.

But so creative are these links and so arresting are the examples, that the argument remains compelling throughout. This is a rich and highly suggestive contribution to British nineteenth-century studies and will be a valuable resource for those interested in interrogating further the meanings of gender in this “age of questions.”