

*Queen Victoria's Secrets* by Adrienne Munich. New York: Columbia U P, 1996. xxii, 254 pp., 58 illus. ISBN 0-231-10480-4, \$27.95.

What happens when a specialist in culture studies assesses not a body of literature but the life and activities of a woman who gave her name to an age? In Adrienne Munich's case it means a series of seven largely disparate topical essays on such subjects as death, domesticity, motherhood, and empire, framed by a largely theoretical introduction and an epilogue. The strength of the work lies in the almost three score relevant (but unknown or little known) pictures that the author has assembled and in the numerous contemporary verses that she has gathered to illustrate her themes. Its weakness lies in the dizzying web of symbolism and metaphorical excess that envelops her conclusions. An assessment of the life of a woman who reigned over (and influenced the rule of) a politically patriarchal empire admittedly invites a sense of paradox. How helpful to a student is it, however, to be told that Victoria's complex role leaves "a tension within representation sometimes figured as absence, provokes a sense of endless mystery, of multiplied treasures, of adventures into a world imagined in terms of superfluity and empire, endless reproduction, production, fecundity, diffusion, absolute absence, and simultaneous total presence" (210)?

As a matter of fact, we know precisely how many children Queen Victoria had (nine), how many grandchildren (thirty-nine), which parts of the globe constituted (in some fashion) parts of her empire, and which political and episcopal appointments she helped determine. But Professor Munich appears ever to prefer the mysterious to the mundane, and, although several of her insights are suggestive, others are fanciful and self-contradictory if not positively perverse. Thus no sooner has she made the reasonable point that, by participating in a fancy-dress ball evoking the Middle Ages, Victoria attempted to strengthen her legitimacy as an English monarch, than she goes on to argue that "her increasingly unstylish clothes stood for democracy" (59) and her "dowdiness. . . added to her moral authority" (68). Analogously, Chapter 4, "Imperial Tears," includes a number of astute observations about the queen's celebration of death; e.g. "Victoria's memorial rooms testify to a Victorian trait of concretizing feelings as if a material object were equivalent to an emotion" (85). The chapter is immediately undermined, however, by a statement made not once but twice (83, 99) that "England had never had a widowed queen regnant." What about Queen Anne during the years (1708-1714) after the death of her husband, Prince George of Denmark?

During a century of empire, the concept of "colonialism" certainly merits discussion, but the author very much overuses the term. It is a fact that Victoria took pride in her Scottish genealogical roots--however much they may have been outnumbered by the German--and that she preferred to spend her summers in the cool Scottish Highlands rather than in Southern England. But does the construction of Balmoral Castle therefore represent a "colonizing masquerade" (39)? Is the