

Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture edited by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie. Burlington, VT, and Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009. xi, 259 pp. + 10 b/w illus. ISBN 978-0-7546-6405-5. \$99.95; £55.00.

To attempt to inventory something as widespread and amorphous as Victorian vulgarity is to attempt almost the impossible. The most important study of the topic in recent years has been Linda Dowling's 1996 book, *The Vulgarization of Art*, which discusses late century aestheticism and the growing distrust of mass taste. That may be why this excellent book, a collection of thirteen essays by important figures in the field of Victorian studies, is one of a kind.

The term "vulgarity" itself, although widely used throughout the nineteenth century, was a difficult animal to pin down. Perhaps best-known as an expression of social-class contempt for the "bounders" who seemed to be everywhere in Victorian Britain or for lower-class "swells" whose affectation of respectable dress marked their lack of respectability, the term "vulgar" nonetheless could be applied to the one expressing the contempt as well as to the ostensible object of that contempt. By the 1870s, as the editors note in their introduction, "vulgarity" had become identified both with "social mobility and the possession of wealth": those who pursue wealth rather too deliberately and those who seek to protect their wealth – and, more importantly, the social status that it sometimes confers – from the grasping hands of others. While it was often involved in the process of marking social distinctions on the basis of wealth, the concept of vulgarity was by no means exclusively tied to income or wealth. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, "vulgarity" often served to inscribe moral, social, aesthetic, cultural, linguistic, and nationalist distinctions that often had somewhat indirect relationships with wealth and social status. One of the questions this book raises looms as a large one about the nineteenth century: are all the various forms of distinction that employ the concept of "vulgarity" of a piece?

This collection of essays is an ambitious attempt to consider the many ways in which the Victorians used the concept of "vulgarity" to make distinctions. While the most important theoretical inspiration to a number of the writers represented here is Bourdieu's *Distinction*, the authors come at the issue from a dizzying array of angles. The editors have divided the topic into four sections – "Vulgar Words," "Common Places," "Vulgar Middles," and "Visual Vulgarity" – that attempt to bring some sort of order to an inherently baggy concept. Amorphous though "vulgarity" may be in the nineteenth century, it is hardly marginal. All of the essays in this collection successfully make a case for the centrality of "vulgarity" to Victorian judgements of value and worth.

Errata: page 96, paragraph 3, line 1: "Ellyn" should read "Ellen"

page 97, paragraph 2, line 4: "Carol" should read "Susan David"