

Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity In Victorian And Edwardian Women's Autobiographies, by Mary Jean Corbett. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. 240 pp. ISBN 0-19-506858-0; \$36.00.

In a theoretical climate which questions the very genre of autobiography as a legitimate category of analysis, Mary Jean Corbett offers a powerful argument against such a claim. Her book belongs with recent studies by Sidonie Smith, Peggy Kamuf and volumes edited by Shari Benstock and the team of Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. Each of these texts attempts in some way to theorize a place for women's autobiographies by challenging the extreme position of the "de-facement" of the autobiographical subject articulated by poststructuralist Paul de Man (which, as Corbett points out, "makes very little sense to those of us whose histories have always been effaced" [6]), and by disputing humanist/patriarchal definitions of autobiography which privilege a unique self. Aside from the masculine coded "unique self," this definition implies access to a public sphere which excludes any possibility for the existence of women's autobiographies, since women traditionally were, with few exceptions, relegated to spaces associated with the private and domestic.

By discarding the humanist categories of what constitutes autobiography and by looking into the margins of nineteenth-century Victorian and Edwardian histories, where the body of the voices/texts of the subjects of Corbett's study reside, she effectively reclaims women's autobiographies. The greatest strength of Corbett's book is the sheer variety of texts from which she draws her arguments. She includes autobiographical writings from more familiar writers, such as Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but also draws upon texts by spiritual autobiogra-

phers, such as Mary Martha Sherwood and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, and accounts by Victorian actresses Madge Kendal, Marie Bancroft, and Fanny Kemble. Chapters are also devoted to representations of late Victorian actress "personalities," Ellen Terry, Stella Campbell, and Irene Vanbrugh, and to histories of Edwardian suffragettes including Constance Lytton.

While it may surprise some readers that Corbett begins her discussion of these women's texts by devoting a chapter to what she calls "two exemplars from the masculine canon of nineteenth-century autobiography," William Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, her analysis develops a common thread among the various sections of the book. She reveals that it is her intention "to disabuse [herself] and others of the notion that, for men, autobiography is a relatively unproblematic genre" (10). Carlyle's text exemplifies this difficulty as Linda Peterson argues in *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (31-32):

Most critics who call *Sartor Resartus* an autobiography mean, in fact, not the whole work but Book Second. . . Yet even if we evade the generic question of the entire work, limit ourselves to the second book, treat it as the autobiography of an imaginary German philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, and then later equate Teufelsdröckh with Carlyle, the work still resists the label "autobiography".

Corbett chooses not to discuss *Sartor Resartus* in terms of its curious relation to a particular definition of autobiography. She concentrates instead on what cultural and social conditions produced the climate for its publication, arguing, in part, that Carlyle's relationship to the professional sphere engaged a "dialectic between genius and hack," because the text was originally published in *Fraser's Magazine*. On different terms, Wordsworth and Carlyle both negotiated their