

*The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* by Antonia Losano. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008. ix, 300 pp. + 25 b/w illus. ISBN 978-0-8142-1081-9. \$52.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8142-9108-5. \$9.95 (CD).

The vital role of women painters in the nineteenth century is well established, so sustained examination of the woman painter in fiction is a welcome addition to recent studies in literature and art. Through close readings of scenes of painting and acts of ekphrasis in mid- and late-century novels, Antonia Losano argues that Victorian women writers used representations of the woman artist to accomplish two goals: “engage with social and aesthetic debates about art” and “consider the cultural position of their own medium.” Losano’s accessible work argues that women writers used the figure of the woman artist to articulate a uniquely female aesthetic, one that attempts to overturn the powerfully gendered binary of male artist/female model. From the introduction to the coda, Losano successfully examines the varied and complex ways women writers used the figure of the woman artist to critique the social status of women and address the “political ramifications of aesthetics.” She surveys recent work on aesthetics and the visual arts in nineteenth-century British literature and draws attention to the fact that the discourse has for the most part failed to address the woman artist.

Chapter 1, “Prevailing Winds and Cross-Currents: Public Discourse and the History of Victorian Women Painters,” synthesizes the work of Paula Gillett, Pamela Gerrish Nunn, Deborah Cherry, and Susan Casteras, among others, to provide a concise history of the English woman painter in the nineteenth century. For readers unfamiliar with art history, this useful chapter demonstrates that the woman artist was at the forefront of feminist agitation, subject to intense public scrutiny and efforts to contain her actions and her art. This chapter also includes a fine selection of sketches, engravings, paintings, and cartoons from *Punch* to illustrate the condescending tone directed towards the woman artist and her work.

Chapters 2, “Desire and Feminist Aesthetics in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” and 3, “Ekphrasis and the Art of Courtship in *Jane Eyre*,” are high points of the book. Chapter 2 challenges interpretations of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) that ignore the physical act of Helen Graham’s painting and her professional status, or read her art as symbolic representations of her emotional state. Losano argues that the allegedly flawed structure of the frame narrative allows Helen’s disembodied voice to elude the male gaze by placing her creations, her diary, and her paintings protectively between herself and the reader. Losano’s insightful reading enacts her thesis by negating the biographical focus so often turned on women artists, such as Anne Brontë, a gaze that diverts attention from their work. She reads the