

Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis by Ruth Y. Jenkins. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1995; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1995. 200 pp. ISBN 0-8387-5278-0-95, \$35.00.

In many scholarly studies of women and Victorian culture, religion assumes a conservative, even repressive role. In this study of Victorian religion and religious discourse, however, Ruth Y. Jenkins aims to correct this misimpression and reinsert gender into our understanding of the Victorian spiritual crisis. Jenkins believes that scholarship has properly "failed to take into account gender" (146), even when the works discussed are by women writers and the protagonists of the works are female subjects. She turns to four prominent women writers--Florence Nightingale, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot--to consider the ways in which gender inflects literary representations of Victorian religion and, more importantly, the ways in which women writers used religious discourse for feminist purposes and self-empowerment.

Jenkins's claim about the neglect of gender in studies of Victorian religion is, like her bibliography, a bit out of date. Both Mary Jean Corbett in *Representing Femininity* (1992) and Valerie Sanders in "Absolutely an Act of Duty" (1989), for example, have considered the uses Victorian women writers made of spiritual autobiography to justify and enable their professional writing, and critical studies of Eliot's *Middlemarch* (not to mention Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*) have scarcely neglected the issue of gender in the Victorian spiritual crisis. Still, there is plenty of space for studies like Jenkins's, and despite the overstatements of the introduction and conclusion, she is right to insist that religious discourse was a powerful tool for the Victorian woman writer and that it could be wielded for radical, feminist purposes. Each of her intermediate chapters--on Nightingale's revisionist theology and creation of a female Christ in *Suggestions for Thought to Searchers After Religious Truth*, Brontë's feminist hermeneutics in *Shirley*, Gaskell's use of religious imagery as narrative strategy and her feminized version of biblical history in *Ruth*, and Eliot's use of religious allusion to critique patriarchy and create a modern-day female saint in *Middlemarch*--is a useful, reliable guide to each woman writer's deployment of biblical language and allusion.

The strongest chapter is, in my view, the one on Brontë's *Shirley*, where Jenkins systematically considers the biblical allusions in the novel to show how "*Shirley* is structured by a series of narrative patterns that . . . foreground the interpretive act" (89) and to argue that Brontë creates moments of hermeneutic crisis to raise feminist issues. The weakest is the chapter on *Middlemarch*, where Jenkins covers much-trodden territory. The chapters on the female Christ in Nightingale and the female martyr in Gaskell are quite good, though they are too diffuse in their mixture of biography, social history, and literary analysis to make a strong impression and Jenkins is often reduced to *referring* to a religious story or allusion without actually