

Adams, Kimberly VanEsveld. *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot.*

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1 As Kimberly VanEsveld Adams states in *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot*, nineteenth-century feminism and feminist movements have received relatively little critical attention. Her book, which combines the critical insights of feminist religious studies and literary criticism, presents a good attempt at reversing this trend. Focusing on the works of Jameson, Fuller, and Eliot, Adams evaluates the Madonna in nineteenth-century art history and literature as a representative of female empowerment made possible by means of the sexual and psychic freedoms of the virgin state.

2 Following a short introduction and a chapter on intellectual and cultural contexts that situates the three Protestant writers' Madonnas in the context of (Protestant reactions to) Catholic art and Marian scholarship, Adams divides her book into three sections dealing with the Madonna in the works of Anna Jameson, the British art historian, Margaret Fuller, the American journalist and transcendentalist feminist philosopher, and George Eliot, the famous British novelist. Adams devotes three chapters to the Madonna in Jameson and Eliot, respectively, but only one to Fuller's conception of the Madonna. According to her New Historical approach, she juxtaposes her analyses of the three authors' representations of the Virgin with sections that supply cultural contexts. This method works well in many instances - for example, when she traces a direct line of descent from the meek and domestic version of the Catholic Madonna (and some of her Protestant incarnations) to Coventry Patmore's ideal of the Victorian woman as the domestic "Angel in the House." But at times it also leads to less auspicious results. Thus, in the section on Anna Jameson, for example, Adams fails to sufficiently elaborate the connection between statues of mythical queens rendered by the American sculptor Harriet Hosmer (who lived and worked in Rome) and Jameson's endorsement of Mary's "spiritual queenship."

3 Deliberately disregarding the more progressive, de-essentializing elements in the nineteenth-century feminisms of Jameson, Fuller, and Eliot, Adams defines them as "essentialist feminists" because - according to her - they adhere to a belief in the equality of the fundamentally different sexes. In the first section of her book, she thus draws attention to the essentialist feminist quality of Jameson's sketches in *Legends of the Madonna* (1852),

which in four out of six instances depict Mary and Jesus as equals, sitting side by side. Adams stresses Jameson's matrifocal vision, according to which Jesus has to bear his mother's likeness since she is his only human parent. She furthermore claims that Jameson empowers the figure of Jesus by means of his feminine traits that are derived from his mother: Jameson's Jesus thus represents "perfect manhood" because unlike his father, the "warlike" God of the Old Testament, he is tempered by the female element and does not exhibit any "masculine" capacity for violence. In addition to pointing out Jameson's essentialist feminism that promotes essentially "female" qualities such as nurturing and forgiveness, Adams commends her for her humanistic approach towards the figure of the Madonna: Jameson's Madonnas sometimes exhibit ethnic traits and are allowed to show their advancing age in some of her drawings.

4 In her short section on Fuller, Adams claims that Fuller's female ideal is the Madonna rather than the solitary self-reliant goddess figure that she champions in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) and that has often been identified as her ideal conception of womanhood. According to Adams, Fuller aims at empowering women by having them think of themselves as "Virgins," as "self-reliant thinkers who are uncontaminated by social mores and live always in awareness of the divine" (139). These virgins are set in opposition to the dependent True Woman or Angel in the House. Keeping the self-reliant and relational aspects of female identity in perfect balance, the Madonna serves as role model for all women, and her type of virginity also applies to married women, or "Virgin Wives."

5 George Eliot, as Adams argues in the book's final section, followed Fuller in making the Madonna as Virgin and mother a symbol of female potential. Thus, in *Adam Bede* (1859), she empowers Dinah, a young working class Methodist acting as a minister to the fellow poor, in the manner of a Fullerian virgin. Dinah, however, is divested of her power when she marries Adam and when the Wesleyan Conferences bar women from preaching. This leads Adams to the significant insight that "[t]he important difference between Fuller's and Eliot's transforming visions for woman is the latter's sense of the intractability of material conditions. For Fuller, the idea creates the historical reality. For Eliot, historical reality might not be ready for the idea" (161-62). In *Romola* (1863), set in Renaissance Florence, Eliot presents her eponymous learned heroine (who adopts her untrue husband's "second wife" and children) in accordance with Fuller's ideal of the "Virgin Mother" who exhibits the essentially female quality of "maternal leadership." As Adams notes, the Madonna becomes less and less prominent in Eliot's subsequent writing. In *Middlemarch* (1871-72), where she is represented by Dorothea Brooke, she is framed by the male gaze and does not realize her female power;

and she is entirely absent from *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Adams speculates that the elision of the Madonna in Eliot's last work might be due to the fact that Eliot did not want to project a potentially oppressive Christian symbol onto a people historically victimized by Christianity.

6 *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism* is a thought-provoking contribution to studies in nineteenth-century feminism. Its weaknesses are mainly structural; Adams complements her main argument about the Madonna figure in cultural representations with rather lengthy digressions into nineteenth-century cultural contexts - in the process she at times seems to lose track of her main argument. Moreover, her methodological approach also invites criticism because she focuses only on the similarities between British and American cultural discourses, almost entirely disregarding whatever potentially important differences there obviously are - as for example, between Fuller's and Eliot's attitude towards class strictures that might preclude possible female empowerment through meaningful employment. But *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism*, nevertheless, gives an enlightening overview of the Protestant feminist uses of the Catholic Madonna figure. Most importantly, it adds to gender studies approaches to nineteenth-century literature and art by providing an additional perspective from the field of religious studies.