

Victorian Reproductions

Workshop, 24th-25th March 2023 (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

Deadline for proposals: 15 September 2022

Following the surge of medico-scientific tracts on human anatomy and sexuality (*Gray's Anatomy*; Geddes and Thomson's *Evolution of Sex*; William Acton's *Function and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*; William Buchan's *Advice to Mothers*) and in the wake of Darwin's evolutionary theories in *The Origin of the Species*, reproduction became a topic widely discussed in Victorian literature and culture. As science began to open up the human body for the public gaze, gestation and childbirth became increasingly alienated from the mother and maternal agency (Doyle 16). Evolutionary principles of arbitrariness and natural selection worked to consolidate a hierarchy of the sexes which tended to reduce woman to her childbearing role (Spencer 30-33, Levine 170-73, Poovey 6, 35). At the same time, the reproductive body sparked awe and anxiety. Mutable and porous, it not only announced its own sexuality, but it also potentially posed a threat to the wholesome and stable middle-class body (Malone 376; Matus 47-58).

In the field of literature, reproduction held an equal fascination. Victorian literature, and poetry especially, as John Holmes notes, can serve as "a documentary source for understanding the significance of evolution within Victorian culture" (60). At least since the Renaissance, childbirth has been used metaphorically time and again to express artistic creativity and intellectual production (Friedmann 49). It is also widely deployed by both male and female Victorian writers, for whom it provides "a metaphor deeply vexed, internally incoherent, occasionally essentialist, and potentially empowering" (Weber 276). For many women writers, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the literary child offered a way to symbolise and critically reflect conventional role ascriptions in the process of creating life as well as letters (Taylor 158). Especially the *fin-de-siècle* spawned many works which renegotiated reproduction in both its biological scientific and artistic sense. Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man*, for instance, revises Darwinian evolutionary thought, stressing a distinctly female origin of the species, and of rhythm and metricality (Rudy 443-449). Reproductions and reproductions in and of texts, of metre and form thus merge with cultural reflections about procreation, configurations of bodies and gender, as well as the development of the human species in general.

This workshop aims to uncover some of the complex textual and cultural relations and representations of reproduction. We especially invite papers on Victorian poetry and poetic forms and their manifold interactions with the topic, but likewise welcome contributions addressing narration, drama, non-literary texts and interdisciplinary approaches. Papers

targeting the long nineteenth century more generally are also welcome, as are papers on Neo-Victorian texts.

Potential topics can include, but are not limited to:

- Darwinism, Lamarckianism, biology, genetics, scientific ideas of reproduction
- Cultural (re)figurations of evolution and reproduction
- Anatomy and anatomical depictions of reproduction and reproductive organs
- Ecology and reproduction of organisms and plants
- Socio-political interpretations of evolution and motherhood, Bodies and body politics, eugenics
- Birth, gestation, labour, the womb
- Maternity, the female/maternal body
- Midwifery, obstetrics, motherhood advisory literature
- Male practitioners, the male gaze in reproduction, practices of anaesthesia
- Victorian sexual morals, practices of concealing and revealing reproduction and reproducing bodies
- Embodiment and the reproduction of sensations
- Reproduction of art, intellectual appropriation of reproduction, the text as brain-child
- Periodicity and cyclicity
- Formal, rhythmic, metrical organisations of (poetic) texts
- Neo-Victorian reproductions

Proposals for papers (250-300 words), together with a short biographical note (50-100 words) are to be sent via email to Wolfgang Funk (wfunk@uni-mainz.de) and Sarah Wegener (sawegene@uni-mainz.de) by 15 September 2022. Please include your name, your institutional affiliation and email address.

For any further questions, please contact the organisers of the workshop.

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