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Mary Wilson Carpenter. *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexuality, and Religion in the Victorian Market.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. xxii + 206 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1515-3.

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Marketing Family Values

Mary Wilson Carpenter's *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies* takes as its point of departure the British commercial "Family Bible," a form of religious literature that has received little attention from scholars until now. Born in the eighteenth century, these Family Bibles were a response to the legal restrictions placed on religious publishing. According to English law, only publishers with a license from the Crown could publish the authorized (King James) version of the Bible in Great Britain and its colonies. To get around this restriction, English printers produced bibles with notes and illustrations. Presented as Family Bibles, these works were often published in serialized sections with the goal of securing a larger market.

These bibles became immensely popular in the nineteenth century, especially among the middling classes. Because of their blatantly commercial nature, Carpenter argues, these Family Bibles have been overlooked as a serious object of study. By neglecting them, Carpenter contends, scholars have ignored the importance of the Victorian marketplace as a site where religious ideas were debated and circulated for a popular, literate reading public. More importantly for her book, Carpenter argues that this for-profit religious genre–along with bible commentaries sold in installments, family bible dictionaries, and popular apocalyptic literature–reveals a type of "common sense" understanding of how emerging middle-class British families imagined themselves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (p. 149).

The first part of *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies* examines the production and consumption of Family Bibles in the Victorian marketplace. In this section, Carpenter uses the Family Bible to interrogate anew Victorian notions of the family, gender, sexuality, and Englishness. Indeed, she argues that these religious texts helped to define and reinforce middle-class values and an emerging imperial identity. A second section examines literary works by Charlotte BrontÃ«, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in order to show how their treatments of family, sexuality, and gender were shaped by commercial religious works such as popular bible commentaries and apocalyptic writings.

In part 1, Carpenter sets out to provide a genealogy of the Family Bible that illuminates dramatic shifts in

how these religious works constructed "family values." The eighteenth-century Family Bible was marketed to the male head of the household as a source of universal knowledge that would enhance his social status as a gentleman. A typical Family Bible, Carpenter explains, might claim to provide a "Plan of General Information, suited to such as wish to gain a PERFECT KNOWLEDGE of the DIVINE ORACLES" (p. 12). This marketing strategy reinforced the father's position as the natural authority in the household, but, more interestingly, it enabled Family Bibles to provide commentaries on otherwise taboo topics, such as biblical debates over effeminate males (code for male homosexual relations). These texts also provided rather racy illustrations of Eve and other biblical women.

The promotion of this kind of universal knowledge, however, soon gave way to a dramatically narrower vision of family reading. By the early nineteenth century, Family Bibles claimed that not all parts of the scriptures were suitable for families to read. These texts were now divided into sections that were appropriate for the head of the household to read and those appropriate for his family–women, children and servants–to know. The stories of Sodom and Onan were among the most obvious passages labeled as unacceptable for family reading; these sections were *not* deleted but were designated for the head of the household, to be read in the privacy of the "master's closet." For Carpenter, this desire to control the text represents a type of Foucaultian disciplining of religious knowledge that she sees emerging in response to a variety of external and internal threats (feared invasion by France during the Napoleonic Wars, ongoing imperial expansion, and class conflict at home) that provoked great anxiety among the middling classes of Britain. Carpenter suggests that controlling religious knowledge was one way of controlling these anxieties.

A major change in the production and consumption of Family Bibles took place by the early 1830s as they were increasingly redesigned to appeal to female consumers. Commentaries in nineteenth-century Family Bibles focused more on domestic virtues; illustrations of Judith the warrior were supplanted by nurturing biblical heroines (Ruth, Mary, and Martha). Similarly, images of Moses, the lawgiver, gave way to depictions of Moses as a baby. Editors also added genealogical tables, to be filled in by the owner of such bibles. Not surprisingly, Carpenter connects these changes in the appearance and marketing of Family Bibles to an emerging ideology of domesticity that made women the spiritual caretakers of the household. It also coincided with the rising power of middle-class women as consumers in nineteenth-century Britain. In this sense, the "Angel in the House" was also a "Material Angel" who now had "increasing access to power even within that sacrosanct discursive domain" (p. 10). By the 1880s, however, these feminized Family Bibles fell out of favor. Women's opportunities for defining a public identity outside the boundaries of the household were increasing, and the New Woman came to replace the domestic angel as a possible model of female selfhood.

The analysis in part 1 of *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies* confirms–rather than sheds new light on–social and cultural developments that historians have long documented for nineteenth-century Britain. The rise of a powerful middle class with its ideology of separate spheres, the increasing femininization of religious practice, the gendering of consumption as a female domain–such themes are extensively explored in a range of important works.[1] Yet Carpenter's account does contain some tantalizing ideas about these religious texts as commodities, along with their impacts on imperial discourse of the period. For example, she suggests that purchasing Family Bibles in their cheap serialized form "might have dramatically changed the dynamics of bible reading." Readers could now read the bible straight through, part by part, as they would a novel, all the while "reflecting on its characters and stories, and discoursing on the strange 'customs' described." Carpenter concludes that such readings "tended to defamiliarize the 'English' bible, making it 'strange' and exposing it as the collection of exotic and unharmonious texts from alien cultures that it actually is" (p. 44). Indeed, she points out that the calls to omit certain passages from family reading were often justified by labeling those passages as "matters peculiar to the Jews" (p. 46). Carpenter suggests that British family values were, in fact, defined by a growing opposition to the customs and practices of Jews and other "Eastern" peoples: "Whatever was exotic, sensational, and alien in the bible could be assigned to 'the Jews' or 'Eastern Customs'; whatever was domestic, safe, and familiar, to that 'English Bible' on which ... the sun never set" (p. 47). In this sense, Family Bibles played an instrumental role in shaping notions of British imperial identity.

Unfortunately, these perceptive insights are obscured in part 2 of the book, which draws on the theoretical writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan to analyze questions of gender and sexuality in important literary works of nineteenth-century England. In this section, historical analysis gives way to psychoanalysis as the author explores how Victorian women writers subverted male-defined sexual taboos and notions of female

weakness, transforming them into sources of empowerment. In a chapter on Charlotte BrontÃ«'s *Villette* (1853), for example, Carpenter examines how BrontÃ« "infuses her novel with a biblical discourse on menstruation," one that BrontÃ« uses to "translate the Victorian medical discourse of feminine cyclical 'instability' into a different 'language' in which menstruation also figures as feminine power and passion" (p. 71). A chapter on George Eliot analyzes *Daniel Deronda* (1876) in relation to the Protestant discourse on circumcision found in family bible dictionaries. Reading for a female erotics of circumcision that served to connect women together, Carpenter highlights the bond between mother and daughter as a crucial theme in the novel. A final chapter on popular apocalyptic writings of the period focuses on how BrontÃ«'s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) drew on such writings to construct their own literary "gynageddon," a type of destructive violence that is projected onto the male heroes of the text (p. 131).

While the chapters in part 2 provide some interesting and innovative readings of canonical literary works, they do little to enhance the arguments put forth in the first part of the book. Indeed, the importance of the commercial nature of popular religious writings–whether Family Bibles or dissenting biblical commentaries–disappears in Carpenter's examinations of the various literary works. Instead, this religious discourse is simply employed to show how women authors read and wrote against the grain. Carpenter also fails to develop further her discussion of religion and British imperial identity. For example, the Lacanian analysis of circumcision in *Daniel Deronda* focuses largely on the sexual meanings of the Jewish rite as a way to re-read family relations in the novel. But what about her earlier discussion of the opposition between British and Eastern (or Jewish) customs found in Family Bibles? Does this very interesting analysis have some relevance to the question of circumcision in the novel? Carpenter fails to link these two discussions.

The major strength of *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies* is its introduction of the British Family Bible as an object of scholarly study. From this original contribution, Carpenter is initially able to generate a good many acute insights into this for-profit religious genre. Unfortunately, two significant problems tend to constrain fulfillment of this initial promise. First, the overall analysis remains disjointed, as parts 1and 2 simply fail to come together to provide a coherent examination of commercially produced religious literature in the Victorian era. Second, the use of the Family Bible and other forms of popular religious writing to discuss issues of family, sexuality, gender, and imperial identity gives short shrift to the meaning and role of religious faith itself. We learn surprisingly little about how commercially produced religious works may have changed the nature of religious practice or beliefs. Of course, these are questions of primary interest to scholars of religion. For other readers, particularly literary critics focused on the Victorian period, Carpenter's innovative readings of key literary works are likely to offer much food for thought.

Note

[1]. All of these issues are discussed in the now classic work by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Also see Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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