

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Carens, Timothy L. *Strange Gods: Love and Idolatry in the Victorian Novel*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 210 pp.

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A breach of either or both the first two Ten Commandments, “idolatry signified the most fundamental of all spiritual transgressions” for nineteenth-century Protestants (1). In *Strange Gods: Love and Idolatry in the Victorian Novel*, Timothy L. Carens provides a fascinating, meticulously researched study of what he terms “the idolatry trope,” proving that apprehensions concerning this chief among sins were as omnipresent in the Victorian novel as they were in the era’s substantial body of Protestant theological writing. Like the many canonical and less well-known Victorian novels he addresses, Carens’s own work is permeated by such texts—encompassing the Bible as well as essays, sermons, hymns, Evangelical fiction, and poetry—making it invaluable for the breadth and depth of its dexterous engagement with this considerable discourse alone. As his title suggests, Carens is primarily interested in the ways in which nineteenth-century representations of idolatry across genre manifested anxieties about romantic love, especially as this phenomenon is evidenced throughout and complicates Victorian domestic fiction. A central premise of Carens’s argument is that, regardless of their own, in many cases fluid, personal beliefs, “Victorian writers and readers internalized the representation of idolatry in Protestant discourse as a transgressive affection ‘for this world’ and, more specifically, for other human beings” (16). Carens reveals how such concerns troubled Victorians’ equally powerful investments in marriage, domesticity, and even narrative closure, taking a myriad of forms but resulting, ultimately, in a recurrent ambivalence toward idolatry observed throughout Victorian fiction. In addition to its significant contributions to our understanding of the authors and novels examined, more broadly, *Strange Gods* is an important intervention across many fields for its illumination of the “intricate and subtle ways in which ‘secular’ and religious ideas and attitudes converge and interact, defining themselves in contrast to each other, but also, paradoxically, appropriating each other’s language and narrative patterns” in Victorian literature and beyond (7).

<2> “Introduction: Idolatry of the Heart” provides a robust overview of Protestant theological discourse on idolatry and its widespread cultural reach through an extensive survey of Biblical scripture as well as nineteenth-century religious sources. Carens goes on to situate the monograph’s claims within the critical history expounding the impact of religious belief on literature in Victorian Studies, tracing two distinct waves of scholarly interest, first throughout the 1980s and then in a “revival” since 2010, to establish how the idolatry trope allows unique insight into Victorian responses to Protestant doctrine. Utilizing analysis of three representative nineteenth-century conduct manuals, Carens illustrates how the Victorians’ navigation of idolatry discourse was particularly vexed as the “concurrent rise of Evangelical Christianity and the companionate marriage” in the era “set the stage for an intensified conflict between faith and love” (22). *Strange Gods* demonstrates how, by diversely incorporating, appropriating, affirming, rejecting, or revising Protestant doctrine, Victorian novelists participated in a larger cultural debate about the “conflict between worldly and spiritual love” (20).

<3> The second chapter of *Strange Gods* extends the impressive foundational work of the introduction by further examining Protestant beliefs on idolatry alongside the equally predominant literary form of the period: domestic fiction. Carens invokes scholarship on the Victorian marriage plot from Nancy Armstrong’s pivotal work through Jill Galvan and Elsie Michie’s recent edited collection *Replotting Marriage* to frame his argument but also to highlight the dearth of religious context informing these landmark studies. Carens’s intervention, then, is to expose how pervasive, persistent cultural anxieties about loving another person too much absorbed from sermons, conduct literature, and sacred texts preceding and throughout the nineteenth century “profoundly decenters the human story of wedlock” (36). Carens takes as his focus Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast: A Problem* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, in which such scruples prove disastrous as idolatrous romantic love that displaces God destroys the characters’ chance at marriage with their beloved. Carens’s analysis of each novel incorporates consideration of its author’s much-studied views, on marriage in Kingsley’s case and religion in Brontë’s, while also revealing several commonalities *Yeast* and *Villette* share when read through the lens of the idolatrous love trope. Most significant among these is the way in which both authors methodically craft courtship plots apparently tending toward the anticipated marriage only to ultimately foreclose that resolution, defying the expectations of both characters and readers alike. Among the book’s most compelling claims is Carens’s point that, while Argemone and M. Paul becomes casualties at the hands of a jealous God seeking retribution for the idolatrous sins of Lancelot and Lucy Snowe, readers are thereby chastised as well for their own

expectations and preferences for happy marriages and satisfying narrative closure at the expense of appropriate religious devotion.

<4> Chapter Three builds upon its predecessor's position that "Victorian novels participate in a debate on the impact literature has on the imaginations and souls of readers" by conceptualizing "idolatrous reading" as another means through which the trope of idolatrous love undermines the conventional marriage plot (29). Framed first by significant scholarly work to date on women readers in the period and then by an exploration of representative Evangelical writings from nineteenth-century women's magazines, public lectures, letters, and fictional sketches, Carens emphasizes the preponderance of such contemporary literature's warnings that narratives of romance could lead impressionable middle-class female readers to create a false idol of love itself, fueled by fictional fantasies that supplant God and could even seduce them into sexual transgression in their own lives. Within this context, Carens argues Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* offers a "much more equivocal" representation in Isabel Sleaford, who, while she neglects home and husband in favor of the romantic texts she consumes and the attendant fantasies she constructs for herself, is also emboldened by such reading practices and psychological play to reject the sexual advances of Roland Lansdell (61). In contrast to the narrative of retribution and endangerment propounded by Protestant discourse, Braddon depicts a female reader whose idolatrous imagination ensures her "ethical character and preserves her moral conduct" while also allowing her intellectual freedom, autonomy, and delight within restrictive patriarchal and religious systems (77).

<5> In the fourth and most substantial chapter of *Strange Gods*, Carens situates George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as the "most daring" of novelistic negotiations with idolatrous love as Eliot defies Protestant discourse by constructing "a humanist heaven, one that acknowledges the divinity of human love, the sacredness of human relationships" through Dorothea Brooke's second marriage to Will Ladislaw (29, 116). Taking, understandably, a biographical approach that prioritizes Eliot's shifting relationship with religious doctrine throughout her life, Carens provides new ways of conceptualizing not only the novel but Eliot's own spiritual and intellectual development as well as he traces her engagement with Evangelical Protestantism, pagan mythologies, and Higher Criticism. Reading Dorothea's first marriage plot and its destruction as imbued with Protestant anxieties about worshipping another person grounded in Scripture, as in the novels explored in Chapter Two, Carens argues that Dorothea's second chance marriage plot sheds such discourse and its sources in favor of pagan mythology and skeptical humanism. By representing Will as a sun god whose love provides warmth and light, shed upon and reflected in

Dorothea, Carens reveals how Eliot radically revises Protestant doctrine to offer “worship of another person and, more broadly, the worship of love itself as a compelling alternative to Christianity” (86).

<6> Just as Eliot eschewed Protestant dogma on idolatry for other paradigms later in life, the *fin de siècle* offered late Victorians an alternative creed to contend with its theology. In “Worshipping Beauty in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” Carens departs from previous chapters’ focus on representations of idolatrous heterosexual love to elucidate instead idolatry of male beauty and sensual pleasure, locating in Wilde’s work an ambivalent amalgamation of both pleasure and guilt, desire and fear of retribution in the cultural clash between Protestantism and Aestheticism. This conflict offers yet another way to exemplify how idolatrous love dismantles the marriage plot as Carens asserts that if Dorian is the center of an “idolatrous cult,” he is “its chief worshipper as well as its central object of worship” such that “the only ‘marriage’ he can contemplate is with himself, a paradox of idolatrous egotism” (123). Through a revelatory intertextual reading of *Dorian Gray* alongside Protestant didactic narratives—stories in which characters are punished severely either with disfiguration or loss of a loved one for idolizing their own or another’s physical beauty—Carens contributes to extant scholarly discourse by demonstrating how Wilde draws upon these such narratives to instead “inspire psychological development, delving below the beautiful surface of the body to appraise the ‘appearance’ of the soul or moral consciousness” (140). Carens’s work on Wilde perhaps most persuasively carries one of the monograph’s core claims, that even for those Victorian novelists who rejected Protestant beliefs, the influences of its cultural power manifest through the seemingly inexorable and “stubborn tenacity of religious and narrative structures” that prevail in their work (124).

<7> In its final chapter, *Strange Gods* provides a satisfying sense of closure as it connects with diverse emphases and rhetorical moves of previous chapters in a study of what Carens articulates as Thomas Hardy’s skeptical, ironic treatment of idolatrous love in *The Well-Beloved*. After a discussion of Protestant theology in juxtaposition with post-structuralist psychological theory, followed by an examination of Hardy’s own spiritual development from Christianity to agnosticism, Carens turns to the Pygmalion myth and its many nineteenth-century adaptations to supply a fresh approach to interpreting the novel’s plot and structure. Though an incorrigible idolator who spends his life literally sculpting idols of pagan goddesses in his studio and seeking the feminine ideal of beauty in life, Pierston is also, Carens points out, a Pygmalion inhabiting a world where divine agency, and thus the possibility of wish fulfillment, are absent. In so doing, Carens writes, “Hardy relies on Protestant language of idolatrous worship to diagnose this frustrating process” of

“psychological mechanisms through which the desiring heart creates an endless series of idols to distract an empty soul” (152). However, unlike Dorian, Pierston is not destroyed by his psychological negotiations with the idolatry of beauty but rather reformed by them. In his ultimate rejection of his life’s work, Pierston achieves a degree of solace through a companionate marriage orchestrated, ironically Carens emphasizes, by a “providential intervention to resolve the plot” that serves to both reinstitute conventional narrative closure and expose idolatry as “dehumanizing objectification” (172, 153).

<8> At once comprehensive and nuanced, *Strange Gods* enriches Victorian Studies by introducing the idolatry trope as another means of understanding the Victorian novel as a “variegated field of reluctant compliance and hesitant revolt,” in which narratives imbued with often incompatible investments in both faith and love “engage readers in a wide-ranging debate about the relationship between those two monumental aspects of Victorian religion, art, and life” (11). The premise that literature affords fertile ground for contending with conflicting ideologies is by no means new, but Carens’s incisive study—with its many contributions to the scholarly discourse on nineteenth-century religious writing, biographical studies, and the ways in which competing cultural preoccupations complicate formal and generic priorities—productively reminds us that “if we hope to gain the richest possible view of Victorian culture and its artifacts, we must strive to take religion as seriously as the Victorians themselves, to understand its sub-currents as well as its main streams and to appreciate how they converge and intermingle with aesthetic and psychological concerns” (56).