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Male Voices on Women's Rights: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Texts Manchester

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► **To cite this version:**

Martine Monacelli, Nicolas Boileau. Male Voices on Women's Rights: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Texts Manchester. E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, 2018. hal-01957514

HAL Id: hal-01957514

<https://amu.hal.science/hal-01957514v1>

Submitted on 17 Dec 2018

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E-rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

16.1 | 2018

Converging Lines: Needlework in English Literature and Visual Arts

Martine Monacelli (ed.), *Male Voices on Women's Rights: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Texts*

Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, 209 p. ISBN:
978-1-7849-9277-4. £19.99

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/7023>

ISBN: ISSN 1638-1718

ISSN: 1638-1718

Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone

Brought to you by Aix-Marseille Université (AMU)



Electronic reference

Nicolas Pierre BOILEAU, « Martine Monacelli (ed.), *Male Voices on Women's Rights: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Texts* », *E-rea* [Online], 16.1 | 2018, Online since 15 December 2018, connection on 17 December 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/7023>

This text was automatically generated on 17 December 2018.



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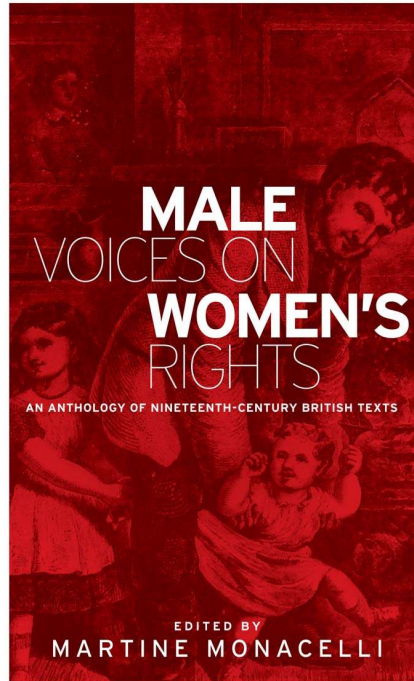
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- 1 In the context of the #metoo movement, some have expressed a long-running fear that feminism and the cause of women's rights may enhance the opposition between men and women instead of bridging the gap between them, and create division instead of harmony. Martine Monacelli's collection of texts written by men in favour of women's rights could hardly have come at a better time to redefine the contours of the extent of men's political engagement throughout the 20th century for women's rights. The question of men and women's equality is one that concerns everyone. Published in 2017, this collection is structured around four sections preceded by a preface and an introduction, written by Martine Monacelli, that frame the selected texts and provide information and landmarks that historicise these extracts. Men are restored to their key roles in the debate that, throughout the 19th century, brought the question of women's rights and equality to the fore in relation to the emergence of other political ideologies, and public debates such as the military, education, civil rights and intimate, sexual practices. Women's rights were then seen as the pre-conditions for social and political improvements and progress of a larger scale.
- 2 In her preface, Martine Monacelli defines the historiographic positioning of her work by looking at almost everything but the question of the suffrage, which was soon to become the emblem of the feminist movement and that by which it is remembered to have started. Reminding us that work on men's activism in the defence of women's rights has been fairly neglected since the mid-1980s, she points out that recent works by Schwartz and Griffin have underlined the intermingling of feminist questions and 'other political traditions' (xi), in which it becomes clear – together with the title chosen – that Monacelli sees a distinction between the question of women's rights and feminism. This, although unexplored, is partly due to the time frame of Monacelli's work. Similarly, by addressing the question of women, men are presented as addressing conceptions and misconceptions of virility and manhood. Martine Monacelli therefore wants to suggest that male activists were far more varied and influential than is often thought. The book does not seek to upstage women's role but to qualify how males have often been perceived in relation to the public debate about women's emancipation.
- 3 The introduction is a quick, useful and dense overview of the various political stances and radical factions at play in the long 19th century, and the place these debates came to grant to women's rights. First of all, women were mainly defined in relation to the religious imprint of gender roles and norms of the times. The Evangelicals, by defining women in relation to morality, produced new forms of women's involvement in the public sphere, especially by having them educated to ensure their moral rectitude (6): women's mission



became the instrument of women's emancipation. Martine Monacelli goes through the emerging Socialist movement, Chartism and Unitarian arguments that similarly played a role in renegotiating the role of women, notably in the functions women were meant, or asked, to play within marriage. Amongst the many anti-secularist groups, and before the emergence of Socialism as a popular movement, the Freethinkers worked towards making beliefs irrelevant and prejudices a source of discontent (12). In drawing these different lines, some philosophical background to political activism such as secularism is given: Comte's positivism (15) is said to have paradoxically prompted a reflection on the place of women. Readers will find the section on the "Broad Church Movement" (15-23) particularly interesting. It follows in the footsteps of well-known spokesmen such as Arnold, and lesser-known but currently much worked-upon figures such as Josephine Butler¹, to delineate the trajectory that led to Christian Socialism as a reaction both against secularism and to socialism at the same time, and their work towards a greater education for all. This section of the introduction finishes with a historiographic bibliography of the relation between religion and women's rights.

- 4 In what can be regarded as a second part, M. Monacelli moves on to exploring the 'Social turn' of the reforms that took place between 1869 and 1886. She investigates here the function of parties, and associations such as the Social Science Association, in order to analyse influences and pressure that fashioned the politics of the second half of the century. The last two sections focus on the control of private sexual practices and the involvement of men in the policing and thinking about such practices, in particular through the analysis of the case of Charles Bradlaugh (36), as well as women's suffrage. Careful to pay tribute to the role played by women in the progress of their rights in spite of the current object of her study, M. Monacelli concludes with these words: 'Belittling women's achievements was never the intention of this book. The history of women's emancipation is becoming more securely grounded in its intellectual context; it is only fair that its male protagonists should have their share of the limelight.' (43)
- 5 After these two preliminary, scholarly chapters, the book is divided into four sections that each contain nine extracts. Each extract is titled after a quote from the author cited and the primary source is introduced by a biographical note that furthers the contextualisation provided in the introduction. Each section is organized chronologically, which enables the readers to follow the evolution and progress of certain ideas through the century. In section 1, 'Comrades in Struggle', texts are extracted from the works of William Thompson (1775-1833), Reginald John Richardson (1803-1861), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), W. T. Stead (1849-1912), Edward Aveling (1851-1898) and Eleanor Marx Aveling (1855-1898), George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), Robert Percival Downes (1842-1924), William Moore Ede (1849-1935) and Walter Lionel George (1882-1906).
- 6 In Section 2, 'Provisions to be Made for the Education of Women', the excerpts are from The Rev. Sydney Smith (1771-1845), the Rev. F. D. Maurice (1805-1872), Richard Whately Cooke Taylor (1842-1918), Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), Sir Alexander Grant (1826-1884), William Forsyth (1812-1899), The Rev. John Llewelyn Davies (1826-1916), David George Ritchie (1853-1903) and The Rev. Cecil Grant (1870-1946).
- 7 Section 3 is entitled 'The Vindication of Women's Civil Rights' and comprises texts by William Bridges Adams (1797-1872), William Johnson Fox (1786-1864), Henry Peter Brougham (1778-1868), Arthur Hobhouse (1819-1904), Henry Fawcett (1813-1884), Karl Pearson (1857-1936), Henry Nevinson (1856-1941), Victor Duval (1885-1945) and Joseph Clayton (1868-1943).

- 8 The last section is about “Towards a New Sexual Culture” and has another nine texts introduced by a biographical and contextual notice: Richard Carlile (1790-1843), William Cobbett (1763-1835), Robert Owen (1771-1858), George Robert Drysdale (1824-1904), Sir John Robert Seeley (1834-1885), Montague Hughes Cookson (1832-1913), Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), The Rev. Frederick Augustus Morland Spencer (1878-1962) and Henry Havelock Ellis (1859-1939).
- 9 Amongst the themes and elements that M. Monacelli’s book enables readers to highlight, the following examples can give readers a glimpse into some of the challenging terms of the debate. Ritchie’s Darwinist feminism offers a radical and powerful argument in favour of the evolution of women’s rights, along lines that have not often been commented upon (112-115); Carlile’s challenging of gender norms (158) and Nevinson’s association of class, social etiquette and the necessity for women to be given equal rights (145) will also strike the readers as sophisticated arguments revealing the dedication of these men to finding new ways of thinking about the equality between men and women; lastly, the presentation of Drysdale as a precursor of Freud in pointing out sexual instincts will surely engage readers in new appreciations of the issue of women’s sexuality (169-170).
- 10 This book is thus a valuable addition to the debate on the origin of what is now regarded as the feminist movement. By choosing to focus on men’s voices on women’s rights, the book may be criticised for downplaying the voices of those men that expressed their opposition, if not their hostility, to any progress of the women’s cause, but Martine Monacelli, like others, knows that this aspect of anti-feminism has been fairly documented, notably by Lucy Delap. Her work, in addition to providing primary sources and well-structured extracts, gives us an insight into the most recent and seminal works published on the question.
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NOTES

1. Frédéric Regard (dir.), *Féminisme et prostitution dans l’Angleterre du XIXe siècle : la croisade de Joséphine Butler*. Lyon, ENS Éditions, coll. « Les fondamentaux du féminisme anglo-saxon », 2013, 316 p.
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