

**Review: Albert D. Pionke, *Victorian Fictions of Middle-Class Status: Forms of Absence in the Age of Reform* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022) 248pp. ISBN 978-1-3995-0770-7, £85.00.**

HENDRIKJE KAUBE

SOCIO-LITERARY STUDIES OF the nineteenth century, such as Jina Politi's '*Jane Eyre Class-ified*' (1982) or R. J. Morris's *Class, Sect and Party* (1990), often work from the premise that members of the emerging middle class asserted their social identity through consanguineous, economic, and cultural standards, demonstrating respectability and refinement to enable their differentiation from those on the lower end of the social scale.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as Albert Pionke suggests in *Victorian Fictions of Middle-Class Status*, this approach neglects the diverse set of strategies employed by various occupational and economic groups within a growing segment of the population to achieve professional and public recognition in the mid-nineteenth century. His book contributes to an ongoing critical dialogue about the ways in which the emerging middle class developed and defended its position in nineteenth-century society. While critics such as Aeron Hunt and Simon Gunn have explored the significance of business and culture as constitutive elements of bourgeois identity, Pionke examines the topic through a series of detailed analyses of popular contemporary fiction from Charles Dickens to Charlotte Yonge.<sup>2</sup> Offering a novel perspective on the formation of Victorian middle-class culture, he proposes a new set of criteria for evaluating class construction in the mid-nineteenth-century novel. Rather than dissecting the assumed lifestyle and habits, pretensions and positions of the middle class, Pionke examines the strategies through which the middle class attempted to legitimise its own status by repudiating the factors traditionally considered mandatory for this segment of society, such as pedigree and

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<sup>1</sup> Jina Politi, '*Jane Eyre Class-ified*', *Literature and History*, 8 (1982), 56-66; R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820-50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Aeron Hunt, *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014); Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

possessions. It is through the professed rejection of these conventions, he argues, that the Victorian middle class created its own *raison d'être*.

In this work, Pionke examines nineteenth-century writers' efforts to define and broaden traditional class boundaries. By presenting its internal workings and external public perception as closely-linked, dynamic processes, he offers an examination of the middle class as an active organism rather than a socio-economic abstraction. Pionke specifies five factors, summarised as 'negative assertions of value', eschewed (rather than adopted) in pursuit of class affiliation.<sup>3</sup> He then illustrates how both canonical and non-canonical nineteenth-century novels dismiss the validity of family relations and private capital, authority, and the significance of statistics – in short, they negate the four features of 'birth, wealth, force, and fact' as indispensable determinants.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Pionke demonstrates how the novels showcase claims to status grounded 'not in presence but in absence, not in displays of legitimating possession, but in repudiations of alternative rationales for social authority'.<sup>5</sup> As his fifth feature, Pionke identifies the ways in which female characters reject the exertion of power as a means to assert social position, exploring the contradictions between conformation to ideological conventions and the pursuit of individual agency. Within the novels, he traces different ways in which the self-perception, -presentation, and -assertion of a population group that strives to define itself are portrayed via the actions of its individual characters. Although less attention is given to the works' broader public reception as well as authors' relations with both readers and other literary figures – critics, publishers, libraries – Pionke applies a fine-toothed comb to textual content, delivering a detailed and well-written study of the characters and their successful, or failed, attempts to maintain or regain middle-class status.

Each chapter concentrates on one of the above-mentioned negations, situating these within the demands and constraints of a lively literary market. Placing the sympathetic depiction of orphans into the context of authors' attempts to sever the ties between birth and class, the first chapter provides a detailed reading of familiar orphan narratives by Dickens (*Oliver Twist*, 1838), Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*, 1847), Anthony

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<sup>3</sup> Albert D. Pionke, *Victorian Fictions of Middle-Class Status: Forms of Absence in the Age of Reform* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Pionke, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Pionke, p. 14.

Trollope (*Doctor Thorne*, 1858), and Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*, 1860; *No Name*, 1862), that interweave contemporary concerns over illegitimacy with the creation of a distinct identity for 'a class lacking antecedents'.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter Two focuses on the vulnerability of middle-class affiliation and prosperity attained by means of mental labour as opposed to inherited wealth. By analysing how their narratives expose the frailty of capital amidst an unregulated and unpredictable financial market, Pionke reveals how authors strove to legitimise their own claims to middle-class status through the rejection of pure economic hegemony, adducing poetic genius as a valid alternative credential. Drawing again on Dickens and Trollope (*Dombey and Son*, 1848; *The Way We Live Now*, 1875), he also includes the financial novels of Thackeray and Charles Reade (*The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond*, 1841; *Hard Cash*, 1863) as well as the lesser-known *The City of Jugglers* (1850) by William North.

The third chapter considers the middle-class rejection of civil commotion. Literary depictions of the numerical superiority of the working class and the threat of public disorder caused by collective action are contrasted with the repudiation of force as a way of social differentiation. Pionke reads the rejection of mass violence in the period's industrial novels by Dickens (*Barnaby Rudge*, 1841), Brontë (*Shirley*, 1849), Charles Kingsley (*Alton Locke*, 1850), George Eliot (*Felix Holt*, 1866), and Elizabeth Gaskell (*North and South*, 1855) as a means to further underscore the differing convictions of the working and middle classes.

Pionke's fourth chapter investigates rejections of claims to authority legitimised by contemporary statistical and empirical data. Pionke criticises the excessive reliance on data provided by social investigations, from census reports to medical mapping, for their tendency to label individuals 'by class and pathology; for members of the status-anxious social middle, such an allegation was unacceptable'.<sup>7</sup> He focuses once again on Dickens (*Hard Times*, 1854), Brontë (*Villette*, 1853) and Trollope (*The Three Clerks*, 1857), but his analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856) offers a welcome change from his reliance upon the novel form throughout.

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<sup>6</sup> Pionke, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Pionke, p. 139.

The fifth and final chapter broadens the scope of his investigation by looking more closely at the strategies employed by female characters to assert social rank through self-abnegation. After re-considering some of the works previously examined, Pionke's reading of Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) convincingly attributes the heroine's claim to middle-class status to the author's upholding of conservative expectations surrounding matrimony and motherhood. Since recent work by Tamara S. Wagner, Clare Walker Gore, Clemence Schultze and Julia Courtney has re-ignited debates regarding Yonge's views on and depictions of female agency, especially interesting is Pionke's interpretation of the heroine's quest for 'usefulness' contextualised within the framework of women's contributions to the formation of Victorian middle-class identity.<sup>8</sup> Concluding with a brief outline of the socio-economic developments of the later decades, Pionke closes his book with a demonstration of the applicability of his thesis to other contemporary works, such as John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-8) or the New Woman novels of the 1880s and 1890s.

Embedded in its historical context, Pionke's rich study provides helpful information regarding the sociological, political, and economic circumstances of the 1830s to the 1880s. This approach both covers the essential factors involved in the emergence and formation of middle-class identity, and contextualises the contemporary events and figures alluded to in the novels. Detailing a range of tactics employed by the middle strata in various European societies to attain social and cultural authority over the last two centuries, Pionke draws on the sociological theories of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu outlined in the introduction. While these provide a helpful contrast to reinforce his own argument, the lengthy digressions do not connect seamlessly with the greater design of his study owing to differences in the respective time periods considered.

Reading the formation of middle-class identity through the prism of Victorian novels enables Pionke to link characters' motivations and narrative trajectory to writers' personal situation and beliefs, revealing the difficulties faced by nineteenth-century

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<sup>8</sup> See Tamara S. Wagner's edited issue on Charlotte Yonge in *Women's Writing*, 17.2 (2010) and Clare Walker Gore, Clemence Schultze and Julia Courtney's edited volume *Charlotte Mary Yonge: Writing the Victorian Age* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

authors in reconciling ideas with reality. Unfortunately, Pionke makes no further remark on the selection of novels or the omission of non-canonical works, and indeed his selection of material covers titles and authors amply examined in the context of middle-class identity and nineteenth-century fiction by critics like Marjorie Garson and Richard Salmon.<sup>9</sup> Like Salmon, Pionke reflects on the economic status of professional authorship, extending this to issues beyond the monetary such as concerns over the recognition of creative capital as a means of affirming status and Victorian writers' simultaneous reliance on, and rejection of, sufficient wealth necessary to claim middle-class affiliation. In this regard, the inclusion of one or more lesser-known authors would have expanded the current research. It is also regrettable that Pionke neglects to mention Elsie B. Michie's more recent work on middle- and upper-class Victorians' uneasy relationship with money in *The Vulgar Question of Money* (2011), which focuses on women and the liberties and restrictions of marriage.<sup>10</sup> Given the centrality of the marriage plot in nineteenth-century fiction, reflections on the legal and personal implications of matrimony in the 'Age of Reform' are a surprising absence in an otherwise comprehensive study.

Pionke's approach to examining the connective tissue between life and literature ultimately sets this work apart from previous investigations. As his study traverses between the authors' economic ambitions, their fictional creations, and the public space of their audience, he reveals the permeable boundaries that enabled the novels to serve as a form of conduct manual for middle-class readers. Using Pionke's work as a guide, scholars might apply his approach to a more diverse range of primary materials such as non-fiction, drama, and poetry, to further understand how literary form participates in both historical and fictionalised iterations of class construction in the nineteenth century. The study ultimately deserves praise for offering a new set of categorisations that shaped the Victorian middle-class as represented in, and influenced by, nineteenth-century fiction: more work employing this multidisciplinary route will be welcome and insightful.

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<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Garson, *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Richard Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Professional* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Elsie B. Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).



BIOGRAPHY: Hendrikje Kaube is a doctoral candidate at Freie Universität Berlin. Her current research project examines British middle-class women in paid employment from the mid-nineteenth century to the interwar years and their representation in contemporary fiction.

CONTACT: [kauh51@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:kauh51@zedat.fu-berlin.de)