

Review: Béatrice Laurent, *Water and Women in the Victorian Imagination* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 262pp. ISBN 978-1-789-97486-7, £45.00.

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Béatrice Laurent's latest volume *Water and Women in the Victorian Imagination* provides a well-researched study on how the notion of the 'liquefaction of woman' gradually formed the "'water woman' complex".¹ In the tradition of Clifford Geertz's theory of thick description, Laurent uses a collection of 'facts, objects, texts of fiction and non-fiction, art and other visual sources', in order to illustrate 'how the aquatic element became gendered and how water-related questions manipulate and qualify analogically questions related to femininity'.² At the intersection of ecocriticism and new materialism, Laurent's focus on materiality (water, art, infrastructure) constructs an intricate semiotic web that demonstrates the connection between the environment and the female figure in the Victorian imagination.³

The linkage of mythical qualities with womanhood in the nineteenth century has been the subject of various studies, such as Susan Casteras's *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood* (1982), and Stephanie Barczewski's chapter, "'I have made his glory mine": Women and the Nation in the Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood' in the volume *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain. The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (2000). Susan Casteras recognises the heterogeneity of Victorian 'cultural mythology', pointing to the depiction of women as hybrid sea creatures, vampires and

¹ Béatrice Laurent, *Water and Women in the Victorian Imagination* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), p. 7.

² Ibid., pp. 1, 2.

³ Ibid., p. 3. Stacy Alaimo posits that 'once materiality – that of human bodies, animal bodies, environments, ecosystems, water, chemicals, and other substances – is recognized as active, as doing things that we may or may not be able to capture or understand, then it is difficult to divide human from environment, mind from body, knowing from being'. Stacy Alaimo, 'Foreword: Gender, Ecology, and New Materialisms,' in *Gendered Ecologies: New Materialist Interpretations of Women Writers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Dewey W. Hall and Jillmarie Murphy (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2020), pp. 1-6 (p. 3).

nymphs.⁴ More specifically, Barczewski explores Victorian authors' endeavours to present King Arthur's and Robin Hood's female figures (Guinevere, Vivien, Maid Marian) as vicious, dangerous and over-sexualised entities that menaced gender spheres, reflecting the 'New Woman' anxieties of the late nineteenth century.⁵ While such works pay considerable attention to the nuances of women's representation in nineteenth-century culture, Laurent is the first to deal in full with the implications of the association between water and women, building on her previous work in *Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain*, which took Victorian attitudes towards femininity in fairytales as its subject.⁶ Laurent's achievement in her monograph lies in her construction of an all-encompassing definition of the 'water woman', which 'signif[ies] the junction where scientific, cultural, literary and artistic interests converge at a particular moment in the larger network of intellectual history'.⁷

In chapter one, entitled 'Context: Speculations on the Origin of the Water', Laurent opens with a consideration of several proto-scientific 'speculations on the origins of the world'.⁸ From Thomas Burnet's cosmogony theory, *Telluris Theoria Sacra, or Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681-9), Laurent's discussion turns upon the representation of the Deluge. Building upon George Landow's seminal work *Images of Crisis: Literary Iconology, 1750 to the Present* (1982), she notes that the representation of the Deluge is ingrained in the social consciousness and functions as a creative force; as she puts it, 'the Flood moved from a remote and almost mythical distance to a very contemporary experience'.⁹ For Laurent, the Deluge offers a starting point in understanding the presence of water in early-nineteenth-century scientific and artistic thought. This is not necessarily an original position – in his 2013 study, *Discovering Gilgamesh: Geology, Narrative and the Historical*

⁴ Susan Casteras, *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982), pp. 47-49.

⁵ Stephanie Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legend of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 171- 200.

⁶ Béatrice Laurent, *Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain: Cultural, Literacy and Artistic Explorations of a Myth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

⁷ Laurent, *Water and Women in the Victorian Imagination*, p. 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Sublime in Victorian Culture, Vybarr Cregan-Reid devotes a substantial part of his analysis to the significance of water and the theme of the Deluge in art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ Although Laurent's thread on proto-scientific theories and Hippocratic elements provides the reader with interesting new material thereon, it does little at this point to elucidate the connections between science, gender and the nineteenth-century imagination.

In chapter two, 'Pure Water', Laurent moves from cosmogony theories to the integration of water cures in nineteenth-century Britain, laying stress on how hydropathy influenced artistic endeavours. She argues that the numerous paintings featuring bathing nymphs in the early nineteenth century 'echoed the contemporary concern with water cures'.¹¹ She proposes that this movement in art can be split into two periods. The first period revolves around the motif of watching women bathing from a distance using elements from Greek mythology (e.g., Thomas Stothard, *Diana and her Nymphs Bathing*, 1815), while the second period draws material from national mythology, namely Musidora and Sabrina (e.g., William Etty's *Musidora: The Bather 'At the Doubtful Breeze Alarmed'*, 1846). Laurent links the convergence of national identity, water cures and science to the construction of the 'water woman complex'.¹² Here, water becomes, as she explains, a 'pure – and therefore angelic or feminine – element', a notion promulgated by the hydropathist, Richard Metcalfe, who championed water's ability to 'restore the national pride and sense of wholesomeness'.¹³

In chapter three, "'Troubled" Questions: Water and Women', Laurent explores how, 'the innocent association of water and women implemented in the first half of the nineteenth century, to support water cures for instance, took a different turn in the second half, and promoted a corpus of literary and artistic drowned, suicidal, hysteric or fallen women'.¹⁴ Laurent's focus turns to still water, the image of 'woman-by-the-pond', and the figures of Father Thames and

¹⁰ Vybarr Cregan-Reid, *Discovering Gilgamesh: Geology, Narrative and the Historical Sublime in Victorian Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 74.

¹¹ Laurent, *Water and Women in the Victorian Imagination*, p. 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Ophelia.¹⁵ Her analysis of Charles Allston Collins's painting, *Convent Thoughts* (1851) presents an interesting angle on how 'watery surface creates *mise en abyme*'.¹⁶ This point might have been better elucidated through exploration of other artistic works which capture women gazing at themselves in bodies of water. The following section on the unhygienic state of the river Thames and the figure of Father Thames seems less relevant to the rest of the chapter. Laurent's association of fallen women and suicide with the water of the Thames could be better integrated with her previous discussion on water, women and reflection. The figure of Ophelia, for example, might have been linked from the start with the concept of 'woman-by-the-pond'.¹⁷

In chapter four, 'Sea Water' and Chapter Five, 'Sirens and Storms', Laurent takes a different direction from the previous chapters, dealing with contemporary maritime evolutionary theories and imaginative constructions of the 'water woman'. Her analysis, inspired by the work of Gillian Beer, revolves around three representations of the water woman: the fertile figure of seawater, the eroticised figure of Venus and the 'seductive water woman' in the form of the mythical figures of sirens and mermaids.¹⁸ For Laurent, both the mermaid and the siren 'represented the primal, uncivilised world of bestial barbarity, because she lived in water her femininity was let loose in her natural element'.¹⁹ Laurent links back to Chapter One in her relation of the uncivilised nature of the woman, shipwrecks, catastrophe, and the Deluge, but, once again, these connections would have benefitted from greater depth over breadth.

In chapter six, 'Domesticated Water', Laurent continues her analysis of fears surrounding the water woman, concentrating on the materiality of water, and especially practices of sanitisation and the controlling of water. Acts of Parliament, the Thames embankments, water fountains and improved sanitisation contributed to differing perception of water from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Laurent contends that the construction of embankments along the river Thames in the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 179.

1860s worked to counter the rebellious potentiality of the water woman, bringing her closer in line with the image of 'The Angel in the House'; the main purpose of this confinement was 'to rule elusive water by giving it boundaries [...] to enclose fluidity within solidity'.²⁰ Laurent's final chapter doubles as a conclusion, making for a somewhat abrupt end. Briefly discussing paintings such as Frederic Leighton's *Actaea, the Nymph of the Shore* (1868) and *Psamathe* (1879-1880), and John William Waterhouse's *A Mermaid* (1900), where women now present harmless and quiet figures, Laurent argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, after a 'full cycle of worshipping, demonising, chastising, taming and finally commodifying the water woman', she had been neutralised as a threat.²¹

Laurent's volume brings together a wealth of material from the visual arts, literature, philosophy, acts of parliament, evolutionary theories and engineering projects. As such, it is an important addition to nineteenth-century studies, demonstrating how the notion of water pervaded British society and shaped women's identity. Even though Laurent provides dense, well-informed, interpretations of complex cultural situations, at times the sheer range of material makes for weak synthesis. The use of subheadings in each chapter might have helped to better signal the various changes of subject to the reader. Despite these caveats, *Water and Women in the Victorian Imagination* constitutes a detailed critical discussion on the interconnections between gender, society and water in the Victorian imagination, leaving the door open to further interrogations of the 'water woman' at the fin de siècle and beyond.



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²⁰ Ibid., pp. 207, 208.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 238-239.