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BOOK REVIEWS

Basch, Françoise. *RELATIVE CREATURES: VICTORIAN WOMEN IN SOCIETY AND THE NOVEL*. Trans. by Anthony Rudolf. New York: Schocken Books, 1974. 274 p. Paper \$3.95.

Reviewed by: Florence Boos, Dept. of English, Univ. of Iowa.

Several books now document the social, cultural, and economic repression of Victorian women, and many articles discuss the presentation of women in the novels of Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, the Brontes, and Gaskell. But there has been no general study of the disparity between the actual social condition of women and their portrayal in the novel. *Relative Creatures* is the first sustained attempt at such a historical and literary analysis, and despite shortcomings, discusses its vast topic with thoroughness and balance.

The title derives from a definition of women provided in 1869 by W. R. Greg in an essay with the revealing title, "Why Are Women Redundant?" Answer: because "They are . . . from their own constitution, and from the station they occupy in the world . . . relative creatures"; female servants are especially fortunate, for "they fulfill both essentials of a woman's being: they are supported by, and minister to, men." Basch organizes her book as a series of comparisons between the daily life of Victorian women and its novelistic reflections; in so doing she emphasizes the extent to which idealization and censorship distort sexual reality. Contraposing the lives of working women and prostitutes in fact and in the novel yields pointed contrasts and an interesting basis for comparison of the novelists she treats. She balances a tolerant interest in the variations within each novelist and an ability to recognize the bounds of their unconscious stereotypes; she gives a skillful and interesting analysis of the range of Dickens' heroines, discusses with some psychological acuity the unconventional and conventional aspects of Charlotte Brontë's views on work and love, records the unusual qualities of Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of illegitimacy in *Ruth* as well as the extent to which her portrayal conforms to melodramatic and sentimental conventions of the period, and provides a surprisingly detailed reading of the social implications of *Adam Bede*.

Relative Creatures' chief limitation is its refusal to consider the minor novelists of the period; Basch herself notes that the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* lists forty women novelists for the early Victorian period alone, not to mention minor male novelists. Were Dickens, Thackeray, Gaskell, C. Brontë, and Eliot representative? Basch assumes so, but offers no rationale for her choice. Neither does she consider the extent to which the Victorian novel was hidebound by the explicit demands of publishers and of the circulating library, as well as unconscious or conscious self-censorship on the part of the novelists themselves.

While Basch's historical surveys are less original than her literary criticism, and in the early portions of the book are too self-contained to constitute a commentary on the texts, they do provide a useful compressed summary of what is already known on these subjects. In general, *Relative Creatures* is an intelligent and useful introduction to a vast assortment of topics and literary works, and would make an excellent text for courses in nineteenth century British literature and social history. It provides a cogently differentiated critique of the portrayal of women in most major Victorian novels written between 1837 and 1867, and provides a good basis for further inquiry, commentary and debate.