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A Room of His Own: A Literary-Cultural Study of Victorian Clubland [Book Review]

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BARBARA BLACK, *A Room of His Own: A Literary-Cultural Study of Victorian Clubland*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 301. \$59.95.

Barbara Black's *A Room of His Own: A Literary-Cultural Study of Victorian Clubland* is an exploration of a surprisingly understudied Victorian institution: the gentlemen's club. Often referenced as a key site of men's lives in the Victorian era, the club allowed its members to fulfill their desire for fraternity and fellowship. The club was a common backdrop for many men's lives, and thus it is no surprise that it was also the setting for some of the nineteenth century's most famous literary works: Phineas Fogg's journey around the world began at the Reform Club, and the world of clubland features prominently in the life of W. M. Thackeray's hero Pendennis as he climbs the social ladder. Barbara Black takes these clubs and places them front and center in her exploration of club culture and the society that produced and sustained that culture. While there is much to recommend in the text, and there are an impressive range of works included, the grand sweep of the narrative is too ambitious and ultimately ahistorical.

The prologue begins by placing Victorian clubland within larger sociological questions about the need to study Victorian identity in terms of sociability. As such, Black seems to take a very broad view of clubs akin to Peter Clark's work on the early modern associational world. The Victorians did seem the perfect club makers, forming groups and associations for any occasion and in every incarnation. This makes clubs a fascinating, and potentially infuriating, subject, as there are so many different kinds of institutions to study from Masonic clubs to itinerant dining clubs to the staid gentlemen's clubs of St. James. Each had their own particular ethos, culture, rules, and clientele; it is important to realize and explore the differences.

The introduction, "The Man in the Club Window," is a whirlwind tour through the many ways that clubs formed the backbone of Victorian life and influenced individual men's lives. Black outlines the varied ways in which Victorian clubs mattered to their members and the culture at large. This is given lip service by scholars, but few have actually investigated what this means. Chapter 1, "A Night at the Club," outlines the basic functions and rituals of the gentlemen's clubs. Black presents a sampling of clubs (Brooks, the Reform, the Garrick, the Travellers, the Oriental) for case study, outlining the different shadings of clubland (pp. 50–74). To outline a narrative of every club would be exhaustive, and instead she presents a well-selected grouping of political, social, and interest-based clubs. After introducing the clubs she

also talks about clubhouse architecture and how design mirrored the intended use of members. The club was a peculiar space balancing the public/private in very specific ways.

Chapter 2, "Conduct Befitting a Gentleman," focuses explicitly on clubs and the novel, in particular on the great mid-century novelists: Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Benjamin Disraeli, and Thackeray. They were all clubmen, and thus it should come as no surprise that clubs appear frequently in their work. Black presents a rich source-base complete with not only novels but also complementary contextual information about the lives of the authors and their own club histories. The reader is presented with interesting contradictions such as Thackeray's love of clubs in real life vs. his rather pessimistic portrayal of clubland in his novels. This chapter, in many ways, could have expanded to become a monograph of its own, as there is so much information presented (much of the richness is also found in the endnotes). "Clubland's Special Correspondents" plunges the reader into the milieu of bohemian clubland and how this space functioned for the many rising society authors and journalists of the time. Life among the bohemian clubmen reminds us how small these circles could be sometimes. The Garrick club affair, hinted at before in the text, is given a full treatment here demonstrating the contested nature of club gossip (pp. 142-44).

To this point the focus of *A Room of His Own* has been almost exclusively London clubland, but in chapter 4, "Membership Has Its Privileges," Black examines how the colonial versions of clubs helped reinforce metropolitan English ideals of male associational culture. Here again there is a rich trove of sources from Winston Churchill's memoirs to Rudyard Kipling's fiction. The chapter even attempts to tackle Richard Burton's bizarre association, the Cannibal Club, which was about as far from the stately reputation of the St. James's clubs as one could find (pp. 170-72). In the empire, clubs formed a complementary, and yet distinct, role from their London counterparts.

"The Pleasure of Your Company in Late-Victorian Pall Mall" returns to Black's question of identity in a narrower timeframe. Here she explores the idea that men in the late nineteenth century sought out escape from the pressures of their lives through male adventure romance, both imagined and real. Black attempts to weave the lives and writings of many social rebels into the club world. The authors and dandies she studies were all members of clubs, and yet they did not offer the traditional clubbable characteristics. Here she stretches the bounds of clubland to include mixed-sex clubs, literary groups, and even bachelor pads.

The sixth chapter, "A World of Men," is both the most focused and by far the strongest chapter of the book. Here Black allows herself fully to explore one author's work, John Galsworthy's *Forsythe Saga*, for all of its richness. This chapter exemplifies how new meaning can be drawn from well-studied texts by looking at them from a new perspective. Both the Forsythe family and clubland itself are presented as institutions whose very foundations are crumbling in the twentieth century. The more clubs become a site of retreat, the less relevance they have for society at large. The epilogue, befittingly titled "A Room of Her Own," pairs with the previous chapter very well. Here Black investigates the inroads of ladies' clubs into a previously male preserve. With a lucid definition of ladies' clubland, Black traces how these institutions both mirrored their male counterparts and varied from them according to female needs. Ladies' clubs served women's increasing social, political, and business needs.

There are a number of illuminating insights in *A Room of His Own*, and yet it also seems to suffer from an identity problem. The book is listed as part of Ohio's British history list, and it appears to ask some very historical questions. And yet, the work is often ahistorical; one cannot treat the heady days of the Regency the same as the 1880s. For example, gambling in clubs for high stakes was rampant in the 1820s, and yet by the end of the century many club committees found their gambling rooms so underused they could no longer locate a single pack of cards. The book attempts to cover the entirety of both the historical and literary references to clubs for over one hundred years in a relatively slim volume. This is an impossible task, and, as a result, generalizations creep in.

The author presents an overview of gentlemen's clubs, and the title's reference to "Victorian Clubland" implies a very specific grouping of institutions gathered around Pall Mall and St. James's Street. And yet at different points in *A Room of His Own*, Masonic institutions, private dining clubs, and bohemian social gatherings are all treated as undifferentiated "clubs." To cover a variety of institutions is a valid approach, but not at the expense of recognizing the variety. Victorians well understood that membership at Boodle's Clubs and the Cosmopolitan Club carried very different levels of social cachet.

While historians and literary scholars should be encouraged to work closer together and be informed by each others' research, sometimes the slippage of methodologies weakens arguments and presents the author with an impossible task. When Black really gets into analyzing the works of Thackeray and Galsworthy, she is elegant, cogent, and deeply probing, and I found myself wanting more. I certainly wish

I had known of Black's research when I was researching my own book, as I believe it would have been immensely useful; perhaps some of my historical findings might have proved useful to her as well. It is an object lesson in how, as scholars of the nineteenth century, we all need to pay better attention to what those in other disciplines are working on, but not lose sight of our own distinct methodologies.

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