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Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark, Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System

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RICHARD BARICKMAN, SUSAN MacDONALD, AND MYRA STARK. *CORRUPT RELATIONS: DICKENS, THACKERAY, TROLLOPE, COLLINS, AND THE VICTORIAN SEXUAL SYSTEM*. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1982. vii, 285 pp. \$25.00.

Corrupt Relations challenges prevailing critical opinions that the major Victorian male novelists were unconcerned with woman's role in their society except as a target for a satire on feminism. The authors convincingly argue that Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, William Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope are linked in their "reluctant, often unwitting exposure of the persistent victimization at the heart of Victorian society—crippling in its effects on both oppressors and victims, but most devastating in its impact on women" (p. viii).

The authors conclude that even more than the novels of the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, the fiction of Dickens, Collins, Thackeray, and Trollope reveals ambivalent attitudes toward the Victorian family structure and toward the rituals of courtship and marriage: "Two tensions are distinguishable in the presentation of the family by these four novelists: on the one hand, it is honored as the origin of Victorian ideals and their best representation; on the other hand, the family appears, more and more frequently, as the breeding ground for conflicts in sexual identity and for the forces of oppression and repression which inevitably spring from these conflicts" (p. 8). This ambivalence toward sexual relations is reflected in the novels of the four authors "through oppositions between directly articulated fictional material and implicit networks of symbolic motifs that differ from and often contradict the overt narrative" (p. 237). The novelists' ironic methods—the use of ambivalent and obtuse narrators, symbolic analogies and counterplots, and subverted stereotypes—all serve to expose "a corrupt system of sexual values and its particularly oppressive impact on women" (p. 33).

The individual chapters on Dickens, Collins, Thackeray, and Trollope are the most noteworthy aspects of this study. The fresh, penetrating textual analyses provide some original insights into the complex "interior worlds" of the novels. In the chapter on Dickens, for example, appears a particularly lucid, well-documented interpretation of *Great Expectations*, which explains Mrs. Joe's puzzling behavior toward Orlick after the attack; the chapter on Collins offers an excellent analysis of *The Woman in White*, focusing on the characters of Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe. The final chapter reviews

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recent feminist criticism to illustrate that although the four novelists treat sexual relations ambiguously, "their fundamental perceptions support a feminist analysis of literature and culture" (p. 238).

A few minor stylistic problems, which might result from the collective effort, could distract some readers. A character is sometimes mentioned several times in the earlier chapters (Miss Barbary, for instance) before the character's name is associated with its novel. There would be more consistency and less potential for confusion, had the novel been cited at the first reference to the character. Also the repetition is sometimes bothersome—most noticeably when observations about characters discussed in Chapter 2 ("The Ambivalent Novelists: A Question of Form") are repeated in later chapters on the individual novelists. For example, Walter Hartright's first encounter with Marian Halcombe is analyzed initially in Chapter 2 (pp. 37-39) and again, without substantial change or amendment, in Chapter 4 (pp. 117-118).

The many strengths of *Corrupt Relations*, though, far outweigh the weaknesses. Because Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark consider Dickens, Collins, Thackeray, and Trollope as radical and revolutionary, they provide fresh approaches to such novels as *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *No Name*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Phineas Finn*. The textual analyses clearly illustrate that just below the surface of the traditional plots with conventional melodramatic structures, the novels "raise issues of identity, power, freedom, and human fulfillment that ultimately call into question the whole system of sexual relationships in nineteenth-century England" (p. viii).

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