



'Dare to think ye free:' Being a Woman of Letters in late-Victorian England

[*Mathilde Blind. Late-Victorian Culture and the Woman of Letters.*](#) James Diedrick. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2016. 313 pp.

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<1>The emergence of the woman of letters in late-Victorian England has been tackled from a number of critical perspectives, particularly in relation to the Decadence movement and feminist issues. Critical attention has focused on the ways in which the figure of the woman writer interrogates current cultural binaries, especially those defining the idea of 'true' femininity, like the opposition between public life and domesticity.

<2>James Diedrick's recent study throws new light on the topic by reconstructing the life and artistic career of Mathilde Blind (1841-1896), poet, essayist, translator and novelist. As the subtitle suggests, his approach aims at connecting Blind's biography to much broader issues regarding the role of women in fin-de-siècle society. Accordingly, each of the eight chapters is pivoted on a single cultural category such as the Feminist, the New Woman, and the Aesthete, showing how each construct shaped her experience (both personal and literary) and how in turn she contributed to their definition.

<3>One of the most fascinating artistic experiences this book explores is Blind's active involvement in British aestheticism. Women aesthetes, as Talia Schaffer has pointed out in her seminal study on *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, challenged the very meaning of the artistic movement they joined; however, in her discussion Schaffer forgets Blind, who indeed, as her biographer makes clear, 'remained an aesthete to the end' (244). Diedrick sets out to fill the

gap in the third chapter, 'A Pioneering Female Aesthete,' where he reworks and extends his previous research on the poet's relationship with renowned artists, including Swinburne, Ford Madox Brown, the Rossettis' and William Morris. In particular, he charts the formative role of her contribution to the short-lived periodical *The Dark Blue*, a key publication in the history of Aesthetic literature.

<4>With many Aesthetes Blind also shared an undying admiration for Shelley, above all with William Michael Rossetti, who loved 'Shelleyizing' (53) in her company and with whom Blind co-founded the Shelley Society in 1886. The Romantic bard provided a key reference-point for her as shown in the second chapter ('Romancing Shelley and Others') and she contributed to a new scholarly approach to the poet, editing his complete works while revising Rossetti's editions of Shelley as well. Rossetti's 1878 collection of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1878) incorporates Blind's emendations, while in the 1894 edition he further acknowledges her valuable suggestions. She was a veritable expert on the Romantic poet who, as she argued in 1870, 'startled the dull night of England' (40). Even Darwin's theories, which proved crucial in shaping her own cosmogony and *Weltanschauung*, could not escape confrontation with Shelley's views.

<5>In late-Victorian London, Shelley was synonymous with 'aesthetic, freethinking and republican principles,' (38) hence it is not surprising that Blind should be attracted by his poetry, being an ardent republican herself and 'a born rebel,' (243) in Joseph Mazzini's words. The Italian revolutionary was among the most renowned visitors of her stepfather's busy household in St. John's Wood. Diedrick provides an intriguing insight into this and other London intellectual circles of expatriates and writers between the 1850s and 1860s, showing how Mathilde Blind's artistic personality and philosophical views were moulded in the course of these crucial years. Diedrick also includes personal details with a political and ideological resonance, such as the death of Mathilde's beloved brother Ferdinand, who killed himself in May 1866 after being arrested for the attempted murder of Otto von Bismark, then Minister-President of Prussia. The young man supported the Society for German Freedom and Unity, led by his stepfather, which advocated the establishment of a republic while fiercely opposing Bismark's political views in the German states.

<6>At the end of the 1860s Blind brought out her first collection of poems predictably imbued with republican ideals, the ardour of which was not quenched by the sacrifice of her brother to the cause of national unification. Dedicated to Mazzini, *Poems* (1867) marked the beginning of a search for poetic identity which not only entailed a confrontation with an English male tradition, but also with German revolutionary writers such as Ferdinand Freiligrath. Unsurprisingly, at this point she was still using the pseudonym Claude Lake, a telling *nom de plume* evoking the so-called 'Lake Poets,' Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, while hinting at the gender ambiguity that pervades the whole volume of verse. Further, as Diedrick points out, the name 'Claude' alluded to 'her rooted cosmopolitanism, her origins on the Continent and her adopted home' (35).

<7>The first chapter ('The Making of a Cosmopolitan') traces the origins of Blind's cosmopolitan ideal back to her childhood in Germany. She was born in Mannheim, then in the Grand Duchy of Baden, but in 1852 she settled in England with her mother Friederike Ettlinger and second husband Karl Blind. Both were involved in insurrections and riots, and imprisoned more than once for political reasons. Blind always considered herself English, though the link with her mother country was never entirely severed. Chapter Two and Three show how the international context she grew up in put her in contact with prominent politicians, exiles and intellectuals who later played an important part in her artistic career. One of the most influential among them was William Morris, with whom she shared an interest in Scandinavian culture and a true cosmopolitan spirit. However, as Diedrick aptly underlines, her cosmopolitanism was complicated by ethnic as well as gender considerations. Born Mathilda Cohen, she was of Jewish descent, yet never identified with the Jewish community. As regards the Woman Question, she was acutely aware of the contradictions it was bringing to the fore and would subscribe to her friend Eleanor Marx's view that women's socio-cultural status was to be read primarily as an economic fact. Her career eloquently illustrates the hardships faced by late-Victorian female writers who chose to earn their own bread while also cultivating an independent mind. Not unlike her predecessor, Mary Wollstonecraft, Blind was 'a woman without money, without influential connections, without even the previous advantages of a liberal education, not only taking up the already sufficiently hard struggle of securing an independence [...] but that far more arduous struggle for principles' (155).

<8>Mary Wollstonecraft is but one of the female figures Blind discussed in her essays and biographies which testify to her life-long interest in the cause of emancipation and increasing commitment to nascent feminism. If in the first chapter Diedrick dwells on how her proto-feminist ideals shaped her response to Mazzini, in the sixth ('Biographer, Novelist, Polemical Poet') he turns to Blind's growing awareness of women's status in society as foregrounded, for instance, by her contribution to the 'Eminent Women Series' with the biographies of George Eliot (1883) and Madame Roland (1886). Indeed, Diedrick's study draws attention to the Woman Question as a *fil rouge* interwoven in Blind's artistic career. Most notably, it undergirds her thought-provoking view of Shelley as a pioneer poet-interpreter who gave voice to a new perspective on what she called 'the most important question of our time,' namely 'the social and political enfranchisement [sic] of women' (45). The cause of female emancipation was paramount for Blind as early as 1870, when she delivered her first public lecture which introduced her 'to the greater London community as a bold and independent woman of letters' (44). In later years, feminism is still at the core of her poetry while underpinning her most significant translation project, that of Marie Bashkirtseff's *Journal*, issued in 1890.

<9>Chapter Seven explores how the bold self-awareness of the Russian painter Bashkirtseff affected Blind's own view of femininity, and further investigates the writer's complex engagement with late-Victorian feminism as a 'Leading New Woman.' During the 1880s, Blind became increasingly committed to the cause of emancipation, embracing the battle for suffrage and higher education. Although she could not herself attend university – or because of it – she

bequeathed a benefaction to Newnham College, with the aim of supporting future women scholars. She knew all too well what it meant to struggle for a living, for it was not until 1892, four years before her death, that she finally achieved economic independence, thanks to her half-brother Meyer Cohen who remembered her in his will.

<10>The last chapter dwells on Blind's final years and her intellectual legacy. What emerges from posthumous recollections of her, as well as from the copiously documented correspondence between Blind and a large circle of friends, fellow artists, editors and family members is a strong-willed woman with a cultivated mind and an unusual straightforwardness. She might have learned obstinacy and openness from her parents: her mother was an enthusiast revolutionary and materialist and embarked on an illicit relationship with Karl Blind when still married to Jacob Cohen; her stepfather was expelled from university for defending liberty of opinion, and was later arrested as a conspirator first in Bavaria and then in France. Her parents' front-line political commitment, as carefully reconstructed by Diedrick, was to prove crucial for Mathilde's education and future choices as a writer.

<11>The intertwining of the personal dimension with the great facts of History is one of the most intriguing features in this book. For instance, the suicide of Mathilde's brother proved an 'emotionally devastating' (29) event that would affect her first poetical work at the end of the 1860s; at the same time, the family tragedy was also the outcome of Ferdinand's republican faith as well as the result of a series of historical events here briefly related.

<12>Overall, Diedrick's study is a 'proper biography,' in Blind's own terms, namely the story of a life 'in which the philosophical insight into the mainsprings of character and action shall be combined with the power of infusing the breath of life into its subject' (152). The volume is primarily aimed at Victorianists, as the first full-length biography of the artist and a well-informed critical work which offers numerous stimuli for further research on the role that women of letters came to play within a broader cultural system between the 1870s and 1890s. Nonetheless, it will prove an interesting reading for a more general audience as well, given the compelling personal portraits it carves out and the tantalizing glimpses it offers into the burgeoning cultural atmosphere of fin-de-siècle London. Furthermore, the study throws into relief the interconnections between female intellectuals sharing the same ideals, as well as a strong awareness of their own controversial position within contemporary society, and an eager desire for change. They were, like Blind, women daring to think them free.

Works Cited

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