

"anonymous heroism becomes the Key to All Mythologies" in Eliot's thought (135). Given Eliot's ironic treatment of the pursuit of keys, this is a strange assertion.

I like Alley's revival of an ethical approach to Eliot's work, and I admire his efforts to take her stated aims seriously. These are moves not often seen in recent criticism. Still, the sincerity with which he approaches her moral teaching results in his downplaying many of the interesting tensions in her thinking and writing. She was certainly not consistent in or untroubled by some of her professed ethical claims, particularly those connected to selflessness and egoism, and her contradictory impulses are apparent in her works on many levels. (In fact, the inescapably paradoxical problem of self-reflexivity that riddles the whole project of "anonymous heroism" points to these tensions.) Alley is not unaware of these problems, but his tendency is to account for them as slip-ups on Eliot's part. For instance, he argues that Eliot's use of a pseudonym is representative of her promotion of anonymity, yet acknowledges that as George Eliot she achieves fame. His way out of this conundrum is to argue that Eliot chastises herself, and learns to transcend the desire for prestige. Yet, it is the fact of her self-chastisement, both the desire and the failure to achieve such self-transcendence, which seems most interesting in Eliot. Another way to put this is that Eliot was not promoting a programmatic moral system, but instead writing novels whose force often comes from the tensions between various ideas. Alley's approach, then, seems too earnest at times, too willing to stay at the level of the moral lesson, too prone to avoid the self-reflexiveness that recent theory has encouraged. The problem with this approach is that it seems to actually empty out some of the complexity and richness of Eliot's works, and in so doing lessens the productive possibilities of her novels as ethical interrogation.

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Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England, by Joss Marsh; pp. xii + 431. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, \$55.00, \$22.50 paper, £43.95, £17.95 paper.

In *After Strange Gods* (1934), T. S. Eliot lamented that the concept of blasphemy had, by the twentieth century, lost its force. Rather than signifying heresy, taking the name of God in vain, it now meant no more than a breach of good taste, a lapse in language. The story which Joss Marsh's *Word Crimes* has to tell is, in short, the story of blasphemy's shift from religious sinfulness to class crime, a shift coterminous with the rise of respectability as a Victorian value.

But the narrative, as this fascinating book demonstrates, is a far more complex one than such a summary would suggest. Blasphemy is hard to identify with precision, located as it is between obscenity, and treason and sedition, between private and public contexts. "Like Michel Foucault's deceptively simple concept of transgression, blasphemy marks the moving boundary line between the permissible and the prohibited" (7). Necessarily, Marsh traces its relations to sexual language (whilst firmly resisting the trap of relating everything to Victorian desires to control sexuality), to euphemism and innuendo on the one hand, and to radical politics on the other. Like any act of utterance—or silence—

blasphemy is also inevitably bound up with issues of authority. The second major narrative tells of the shift from the Bible to literature as the preeminent source of cultural and social value, with literature becoming an authority with the backing of the law far earlier than has previously been recognised. By mid-century, the decisive schism was between "taste" and "vulgarity." The question of style came to count for more than religious content per se. The clear correlation was that to write in a plain manner, so that one would be widely understood, was also to have no "literary" standard—or excuse sanctioned by class-based access to education—behind which to shelter. The fact that, by the 1880s, doubt and unbelief were in fact widespread counted for nothing when it came to the opportunity for the exercise of "class discrimination, property thinking, and political motives" that the invocation of the blasphemy laws allowed (154).

Blasphemy's legal status provides, in the form of trials, the perfect *petits récits* through which these somewhat grander narratives can be told. Marsh moves from the case of William Hone, tried three times on three consecutive days in 1817 for three parodies of the catechism, the creed, and the litany; through Richard Carlile, publisher of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1793-96); Henry Hetherington; Edward Moxon, publisher of Shelley's *Complete Works* (1840), including the atheistical *Queen Mab*; and George Holyoake, connected both to Owenite socialism and the *Oracle of Reason*, the first openly atheist journal to be brought out in England, in the early 1840s. She gives very full weight to the *Freethinker* case of 1883, when G. W. Foote was prosecuted for this comic penny paper. Throughout all this, familiar texts suddenly take on new resonances. *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) is placed in the context of the formation of the National Secular Society and the threats to High Culture offered by Charles Bradlaugh; the title of Leslie Stephen's *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking* (1873) is revealed to be a homage to the labels chosen by Foote's mid-century descendants. Above all, in a chapter of its own, the scandal caused by *Jude the Obscure* (1895), in which blasphemy "is both subject and willed effect" (269), is convincingly reconstituted. Marsh links the book's hero back to the case of Thomas Pooley, who, in 1857, became blasphemy's one rural legal martyr. More broadly, she uses *Jude* to bring together the strands dealing with demotic voice and with plain speaking, with class crime and with offense against literary values, which run through her whole study.

Apart from a few minor errors (a "Dicken's" and a "Wasteland") and some occasional over-simplifications—not all of Eliot's novels use epigraphs; scientific language's fascination with metaphor and analogy gives the lie to the assertion that it was entirely preoccupied with plain speaking; Mr. Hale, in *North and South* (1854), surely does not doubt in the way that a secularist might have hoped he would—this book conveys Marsh's wide-ranging scholarship in a compellingly energetic manner. Not the least of its virtues is to point forward to the twentieth century, to the *Lady Chatterley* and *Gay News* trials, showing that blasphemy is far from a dead letter of the law. Nothing, of course, could bring this home more forcibly than the case of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which, as Marsh is well aware, threw into relief that English blasphemy legislation protects only the Church of England, "the historical established religion of the state and the ruling classes" (16)—not Islam, not Catholicism, not non-conformity.

This dissonance between national identity and the varied beliefs which in fact are held by a nation's people prompts a number of further questions. What cross-cultural comparisons may be drawn? What was the status of blasphemy in the United States, a

country popularly thought of, within Britain, as signifying vulgarity? And what of Catholic Europe? We learn briefly about the influence of Leo Taxil's *Librairie anti-cléricale* (1881-82) on G. W. Foote (and later on James Joyce), which would seem to suggest a greater liberalism, but this is countered by a decision of the French Société de Linguistique in 1866 forbidding discussion of the origin of language. What conclusions may be drawn about the interconnections of state, religion, and language once one looks beyond national boundaries?

Word Crimes is a book which breaks down boundaries in its own right: it illuminates the history of the book and of the reading public during the nineteenth century; it offers new ways of bringing religion, class, and politics together; it makes a significant contribution to the history of linguistic usage. Marsh moves with impressive intellectual agility between Home Office records and the history of the Salvation Army; between music-hall jokes and the pressures of solitary confinement. She offers brief but fresh readings of novelists as diverse as Charles Dickens, Mrs. Humphry Ward, and Marie Corelli. The interdisciplinarity of this absorbing work is, in itself, testimony to the pervasive, and hitherto underestimated, importance of blasphemy to nineteenth-century literary and cultural history.

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Thackeray the Writer: From Journalism to *Vanity Fair*, by Edgar F. Harden; pp. xii + 221. London: Macmillan, 1998; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, £45.00, \$55.00.

Edgar Harden is one of those Victorianists whose careers are defined by devotion to a single author. In addition to writing two critical books, which combine meticulous manuscript work with astute commentary, and many articles on William Makepeace Thackeray, he has produced editions of *Henry Esmond* (1989) and *Barry Lyndon* (1999), assembled a 1,500-page supplement to Gordon Ray's edition of the letters (1994), published a selection of the letters (1996), edited 1,350 pages of Thackeray annotations (1990), compiled a 1996 checklist of Thackeray's contributions to newspapers, periodicals, and books, and composed a reader's companion to *Vanity Fair* (1995).

Adopting his thesis from George Saintsbury, in *Thackeray the Writer: From Journalism to Vanity Fair*, Harden argues that Thackeray's characteristic genius is present in his earliest works, and that his long literary apprenticeship (*Vanity Fair* [1847-48] began appearing when he was thirty-five) was therefore a steady progress toward the full revelation of that genius. To complete this task in a slim volume, Harden announces in his Preface that he "shall not provide a pedantic summary of previous views of Thackeray and his works, together with an attendant series of elaborate footnotes documenting these views" (ix). All well and good. But Harden also barely refers to the wealth of scholarship on periodical publication, the literary world, and British society during the heady 1830s, when Thackeray began his career. This omission is surprising, and at times mystifying. After all, in *Pendennis* (1848-50), *The Newcomes* (1853-55), *The Adventures of Philip* (1861-62), and elsewhere, Thackeray himself shows how profoundly publishers, editors, and other writers shaped virtually everything that saw print during those years.