

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Katherine D. Harris

Spring 2012

Review of Poetry, Pictures, and Popular
Publishing: The Illustrated Gift Book and
Victorian Visual Culture 1855-1875 by Lorraine
Janzen Kooistra

Katherine D Harris, *San Jose State University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/katherine_harris/11/

Kooistra, Lorraine Janzen. *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing: The Illustrated Gift Book and Victorian Visual Culture 1855-1875*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780821419649. Pp. 305. 65 illus. \$59.95

Lorraine Kooistra's ambitious study of illustrated gift books 1855-1875 offers a starting point for understanding the overwhelming volume of printed materials during the Victorian period. By working through poetry and illustrations using D.F. McKenzie's sociology of the text, Kooistra argues that "at the moment the text becomes embodied in form and enters the material world, the 'eye' of the reader replaces the 'I' of the poet, affirming the book's human uses and social destinations" (1). By invoking McKenzie, Gerard Genette, Jerome McGann, George Bornstein, and others involved in bibliography, history of the book, and textual scholarship, Kooistra associates the importance of the reader with making meaning as its disseminated in a particular form. She begins with 1855 asserting that these twenty years represent the long 1860s of the "golden age of wood-engraved illustrations," the periodical press, and Christmas gift books (2).

With Chapter One, Kooistra situates this study theoretically within class studies (Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu) and proposes that "poetic gift books were a 'popular' form of 'high' art – that is, mass-produced, accessible forms of the elite arts of pictures and poetry, packaged for a middle-class audience eager for cultivation" (3). Middle-class desires for mobility and a recuperation of "popular" literature underscore most of the chapters within this study in an attempt to articulate the "place" of poetry in nineteenth-century culture (5). Though this study is rich with illustrations and deeply fascinating for its historical details, this class-based argument seems almost tangential to the entire work and most difficult to prove using the historical methodology that Kooistra primary employs. Gender becomes an appropriate and more well-argued focal point in chapter four. Kooistra focuses on the gift books as a moment when literary culture bloomed with an expensive representation of Victorian culture overall. She acknowledges that limiting her study is necessary for close attention to the relationship among reader, illustration, poetic text, and the gift book, especially since the gift book already has a tradition of acceptance from the early nineteenth-century literary annual craze. Even with these acknowledgements, though, Kooistra's study makes some assumptions about the early literary annual publication history and steel plate engravings with sweeping gestures that ignore some critical studies by Feldman, Linley, Ledbetter, even McGann.

The relationship between Tennyson's poetic and visual endeavors as they were represented by publisher, Edward Moxon dominates Chapter Two. The history of Moxon provided here is undoubtedly one of the strengths of this study. She moves into an explanation of the Pre-Raphaelites' influence on *ut pictura poesis*, authorial intent, readers' reception, and interpretive acts. With adept, swift moves, Kooistra compares a traditional engraving to that of a Pre-Raphaelite artist and finds an engaging perspective that relies on emotion rather than landscape. The most fascinating moment here is actually *seeing* Kooistra's comparisons of two disparate engravings from the Moxon Tennyson volume, though some of the claims about reader reception would be difficult to prove. In the end, Kooistra claims that the Pre-Raphaelites redefined engravings as high art and exhibited their work as a form of entertainment *and* education directed at the working class.

Kooistra focuses on the mass production of culture in the Dalziel brothers' fine art books with Chapter Three, a chapter that maintains the discussion surrounding class and nationhood. By relying on the history of the periodical press, Kooistra demonstrates that the "popular appeal of the poetic gift book was largely established in the periodical press, which fostered an expectation that poetry and pictures belonged together" (80). Early in this chapter, Kooistra brings in an interesting, but somewhat unnecessary, aside comparing the development of the illustrated press to the twenty-first century's fast-paced developments in the computer age – with a mention of Babbage's calculator. Visual literacy and

portability play a large role in this chapter, but Kooistra claims that this is the first we see of this when in fact both of these elements in print culture were dominant during the early nineteenth-century with literary annuals, almanacs, even emblems books. In this chapter, Kooistra draws gender boundaries by claiming that the Christmas gift books were “intended for a wife, daughter, niece, or friend” (95). After moving through a well-documented history of the Dalziel Brothers' fine art books and ekphrastic poetry, Kooistra provides several close readings of the visual and verbal – her strongest theoretical and critical chapter in this study.

In Chapter Four, “Second-Rate Poets for Second-Rate Readers,” the study focuses on women poets and the development or furthering of the poetess aesthetic as it was explicitly demarcated by the poetry and careers of Eliza Cook, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Jean Ingelow. Though Kooistra doesn't identify this particular aesthetic, it's apparent in her description of the poetry (especially in relation to Laura Mandell and Yopie Prin's work on the poetess): “Although individually distinct in style, their poetry tended to be narrative in nature, direct in expression, musical in appeal, and affective or sentimental in content, dilating on losses familiar to all . . . They also celebrated the resilience of the human spirit; the various joys of domestic work and social life; the love of everyday objects and animals; and the beauty of nature” (131). Towards the chapter's conclusion, Kooistra again returns to the middle-class as the recipient of this kind of poetry, of course delivered in the gift book genre.

The final chapter is a case study of Lord Tennyson's indirect influence on the popularization of poetry and its relationship with engravings. This concluding chapter recognizes the end of the illustrated gift book craze with the publication of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* Cabinet Edition published in 1874-1875. The Coda nods toward the continuation of the illustration tradition beyond 1875, especially in anthologies, due to social and cultural changes that help alter the production of books (246). Leah Price's work on anthologies might have pushed this discussion further; instead, Kooistra concludes with Johanna Drucker and fulfills her promise that her study demonstrates “the significance of 'drawing-room books' as both material objects and historical events” (248). For Kooistra, the reader, by engaging in both visual and linguistic interactions, gains prominence in the production of knowledge.

Kooistra's work on the illustrated gift book in this twenty-year span proves very useful and indeed provides an elaborate view of the illustrations themselves (with a huge 65 engravings included within the chapters themselves). Despite a few lapses and generalizations, Kooistra's work elucidates the relationship between visual and verbal middle-class literary culture during this twenty-year Victorian period.

Katherine D. Harris
San Jose State University