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978-0-521-87249-2 - Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability

Gowan Dawson

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RESPECTABILITY

The success of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories in mid-nineteenth-century Britain has long been attributed, in part, to his own adherence to strict standards of Victorian respectability, especially in regard to sex. Gowan Dawson contends that the fashioning of such respectability was by no means straightforward or unproblematic, with Darwin and his principal supporters facing surprisingly numerous and enduring accusations of encouraging sexual impropriety. Integrating contextual approaches to the history of science with recent work in literary studies, Dawson sheds new light on the well-known debates over evolution by examining them in relation to the murky underworlds of Victorian pornography, sexual innuendo, unrespectable freethought and artistic sensualism. Such disreputable and generally overlooked aspects of nineteenth-century culture were actually remarkably central to many of these controversies. Focusing particularly on aesthetic literature and new legal definitions of obscenity, Dawson reveals the underlying tensions between Darwin's theories and conventional notions of Victorian respectability.

GOWAN DAWSON is Lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Leicester. He is co-author of *Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical: Reading the Magazine of Nature* (Cambridge, 2004).

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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For my mother and in memory of my father

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