

# Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought

---

Volume 3  
Issue 1 *Women and Social Justice*

Article 7

---

Fall 2008

## Pamela K. Gilbert. The Citizen's Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England.

Kristen Hague  
*Mesa State College*, [khague@mesastate.edu](mailto:khague@mesastate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hague, Kristen (2008) "Pamela K. Gilbert. The Citizen's Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England.," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol3/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@salve.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@salve.edu).

**Pamela K. Gilbert. *The Citizen's Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England*.** Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007. 194pp. ISBN 081421052-X. (hardcover)

*By Kristen Hague, Ph.D, Department of Languages, Literature & Mass Communications, Mesa State College*

With the passing of Reform Bills in 1832 and 1867, England began to consider seriously the idea of citizenship as it related to the voting franchise. Although both of these bills couch fitness for citizenship in economic terms, the realities, Pamela K. Gilbert argues, were more complicated than owning property or paying a certain amount of rent. Instead, the concept of fitness was tied to creating citizens who held certain middle-class values and practices in common: domestic economy, physical and moral health, properly regulated desires, and the idea of an individual self free from class concerns. As elaborated in Parliamentary debates and the media, the fit citizen, deserving of the franchise, was the result of good domestic practices, and the quality and strength of his home, the private feminized sphere, was what qualified him to participate in the public one.

In examining these seemingly fundamental contradictions, Gilbert builds on the work of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. For Arendt, the rise of the social marked the destruction of the division between private and public, creating a nation of people without individuality.<sup>1</sup> Habermas, on the other hand, celebrates the developing public sphere for fostering political debate and discussion. Like Arendt, he remains wary of the mixing of private and public matters. For Gilbert, however, the emergence of the social and the growth of the public sphere “are not discrete events” (2). Instead, it is “the social as a mediating domain that enables the development in this transitional period, of a notion of liberal government that can mediate between ‘matters of the household’ and those of citizenship, both allowing for and policing a more inclusive model of political participation” (2).

The household matters that Victorians were concerned with did not extend to all levels of society; instead, they focused largely on the lower classes in an attempt to inculcate them with the middle-class values they were seen to be lacking. Gilbert breaks her analysis of this issue into three well-documented sections. Drawing from Parliamentary debates about the Reform Bills, Section I examines mid-nineteenth century political views of citizenship and fitness. In Section II, Gilbert turns her focus to the social and the efforts of politicians and female reformers like Octavia Hill to penetrate the private spheres of newly enfranchised Britons. Issues of public health and privacy played a considerable role as Victorians came to believe that it was not the person who determined the home environment but rather the environment that created a certain type of person. Overcrowding, then, needed to be alleviated so the newly enfranchised had the space and privacy necessary to develop into individuals with carefully reasoned political views (which, ideally, would be the same views as those held by the more powerful classes). But it

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert later defines the social as “an area technically associated with the ‘private’ in the strict sense, but which actually mediates between the shifting boundaries of public and private, in order to safeguard and produce that very split, in the service of the developing liberal conception of citizenship” (66). A family’s “social life” may seem private but actually combines both the private and the public by bringing public “business” (courtship, marriages, business alliances) in to the private or domestic sphere.

wasn't enough to merely provide more space for the poor, Gilbert explains; instead, it was more important that the poor actually desired upward mobility. Although disenfranchised, middle class women play a central role in these reforms, visiting the homes of the poor and providing instruction.

In the third section, Gilbert turns to fictional Victorian representations of the individual, particularly in mid-century "social problem" novels. Through analysis of novels by Disraeli, Oliphant, Gaskell, Dickens, and Eliot, Gilbert traces the shifting and developing Victorian concern with "proper" subjectivity and domestic practices. In Disraeli, the concern rests with sanitary reform, while later novels by Gaskell and Dickens are more concerned with the idea of social fitness as it related to individual development. With Eliot's *Felix Holt*, the concerns shift yet again to moral hygiene and the often problematic or contradictory impulses faced by individuals who "having internalized all the desires and behaviors of the proper bourgeois social life, were still unable to follow out that path of social development" (157).

While much good came out of the Reform Bills and the debates that resulted, there is still something troubling, Gilbert asserts, about the movement to create fit and morally upstanding citizens out of the lower classes. One obvious problem is the assumption that the lower classes, by nature of their economic status, will naturally behave badly and that they must be remade before they can participate fully in the political process. More specifically, "liberalism infantilized every person or culture who did not fit into its views of the good citizen" (174). In creating and promoting the idea of a universal "natural" subject, England also created its opposite; anyone who did not fit the definition of a proper subject became other, unnatural, deviant. This state of affairs also was troubling in terms of gender. Women, in charge of the domestic sphere, were given the task of creating fit male citizens, yet they were largely excluded from the public sphere because their very sex denied them fitness.

*The Citizen's Body* is a meticulously researched and compelling study of the development of the notion of citizenship in Victorian England. This comprehensive work will appeal to scholars working in literature, history, cultural studies, sociology and women's studies.