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Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution (review)

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Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution.

By Susan Zlotnick. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Pp. viii+325; appendixes, notes/references, bibliography, index. \$39.95.

The changes wrought in British society by industrialization exercised the minds of contemporaries, who debated the good and ill effects of the new mode of production in a wide range of publications, including works of fiction. The latter are Susan Zlotnick's concern, and she argues that authors' responses to industrialization differed by gender. She bases her claim on an analysis of works by Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë, the slightly earlier Frances Trollope, and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, as well as by two factory women. Her male examples range from Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Benjamin Disraeli, and Charles Dickens to Chartist novelists and dialect writers. While these male authors, Zlotnick maintains, rejected the factory system—which contrasted starkly with their image of an idealized past—their female counterparts believed industrialization to have the potential for liberating women.

Zlotnick's analysis foregrounds gender, because for contemporaries nascent industrialism heralded both a social and a sexual revolution. The overwhelmingly female workforce of the early mills led observers to perceive the factory system as causing a reversal of supposedly natural gender roles; the system was absorbing large numbers of women into the wage-earning workforce while condemning many men to idleness. Hence the author's search for gender specificity in the responses to industrialization. As part of the attempt to make sense of the factory system, Zlotnick rightly argues that its literary representations may afford insight into the way in which this endeavor was shaped by British culture.

As an instance of cultural, rather than merely literary, analysis this book is of potential interest to historians of British industrialization. Interesting though Zlotnick's argument may be, however, it lacks conviction because her book premises the curiously uncritical equation of industrialism and modernity. To buttress her claim about the persistence of antimodernism in British culture, she has recourse only to Martin Wiener's highly contentious argument about "the decline of the industrial spirit." Her view of industry as the harbinger of modernity prevents Zlotnick from distinguishing the outright rejection of industrialism from a critique of the specific form it assumed in early-nineteenth-century Britain. In castigating the male literary critics of industrialization for refusing to accept the material reality of the factory system, she denies the legitimacy of any fundamental critique of industrialization—this despite her own observation that up until midcentury the tenacity of the factory system was no foregone conclusion. True, the industrial system was measured against a yardstick derived from qualities perceived in a threatened way of life that appeared

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worth preserving. Backward-looking this view certainly was, but Zlotnick ignores the real and substantial losses entailed in the transition from the domestic workshop to the factory. This is indicative of her general lack of familiarity with historical research.

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While Zlotnick is to be congratulated for foregrounding issues of gender, her adherence to a view of capitalism and patriarchy as two distinct but interlocking systems of dominance ignores important developments in feminist thinking over the past ten years or so and seriously hampers her analysis. Demarcations both between class and gender and within each category become blurred when industrialism is welcomed for the employment opportunities it offered women, regardless of low wages and appalling working conditions. Nor is it clear how the figure of the poorly paid mill girl could have inspired middle-class women, who strove for an independence less spurious, based on employment that would not imperil their social status. The issue of domination between different groups of women is sidelined when female writers are praised for endowing middle-class ladies with the power to improve factory conditions for women by imposing their own brand of domesticity, thereby outshining the paltry reforms initiated by male parliamentarians.

Zlotnick's achievement in this book lies in highlighting the centrality of the perceived gender revolution to the response to industrialization, but its classification of authors by gender betrays deficient historical knowledge of the relevant period and a homogenization of categories that deprives them of their analytical edge.

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