

Light Touches: Cultural Practices of Illumination, London 1780-1840

**Submitted by Alice Barnaby to the University of Exeter as a thesis for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, September 2009.**

Volume 1 of 2.

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Abstract

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, urban lives were touched by a series of innovations in the technology and aesthetics of illumination. Unfamiliar combinations of new fuel sources and auxiliary equipment (for example, curtains, blinds, glass, mirrors and lampshades) meant that cities looked and felt different during both the day and the night. The spheres of elite, popular, public and private culture explored, exploited and were fascinated by the cultural value of light. Through four case studies in the aesthetics of urban illumination, my thesis demonstrates how the acquisition of skills for the manipulation of transparent and reflective surfaces were crucial when negotiating a balance between self-expression and standards of taste, morality, gender and class. Rather than relying upon canonical examples of the period's fascination with light, such as the high Romantic idealization of nature's sunrises and sunsets, my thesis investigates more everyday encounters with light in the built environment: the fashionably genteel pastime of transparent painting; the gendering of light to design both domestic interiors and female identity; the appropriation of patrician top-lighting for public buildings of education and exhibition; and the popularity of illuminated spectacles in commercial pleasure gardens. I argue that these new possibilities of lighting temporarily enabled new possibilities of subjectivity. My historical phenomenology suggests that the formation of perception between 1780 and 1840 was actively directed towards changes in the world through a finely-attuned consciousness of light.

Acknowledgements

It has been a huge joy and privilege to spend the last four years of my life working towards a Ph.D. The excitement of reading and writing has been made all the more enjoyable through the pleasures of listening to, and talking with, members of Exeter's research community. In particular I would like to thank my examiners Professor Nick Groom and Professor Dana Arnold for their rigorous and constructive engagement with my work. I would also like to thank Professor Regenia Gagnier and members of the English Department's Centre for Victorian Studies. Others who have been kind enough to read my work include Professor Isobel Armstrong, Dr Mary Barnaby, Dr Shani Rousso, Vicky Smith, Dr Gillian Swanson and Dr Lewis Ward. I appreciate the invaluable support and feedback they have given me. I am grateful to the AHRC for three years of funding. In the fourth year I benefited from a Yale Centre for British Art residential fellowship and a Library Research Grant from the Getty Research Institute. Finally and most importantly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr John Plunkett, for his continual support, encouragement and intellectual generosity.

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