

**Beautiful Stranger: the Function of the Coquette in Victorian literature.**

Submitted by Maria Ioannou, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, March 2009.

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## Abstract

Theories of beauty normally engage with beauty in the abstract, or with reactions to beauty - beauty's effect on others. This thesis considers how coquettish female beauty has been embodied in Victorian literature by the Brontës, Dickens, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and to a lesser extent women's periodical literature. It argues that the figure of the coquette addresses antithetical discourses on the Victorian woman and assimilates them in such a way as to express a subversive beauty discourse, in which beauty condenses differing female experiences and formulates the search for identity as a collective female effort.

The coquette is linked with controversial women's issues such as marriage failure, domestic abuse and female eroticism; the ambivalence of her relationship with the text's heroine shows the scope and limits of female autonomy. The dialectic between rejection and acceptance in which the coquette participates in specific narrative strategies shows women engaged with women's problems, their erotic potential, and their relationship(s) to each other.

The thesis also reflects on feminist literary theory, especially current ideas on female writing, broadly defined as a search for female belonging. Recent criticism holds that the Victorian coquette operates either to show that eroticism was part of the Victorian woman's identity, or as a passive surface upon which certain aspects of the protagonist are illuminated. This thesis argues that this is only part of the story; additionally, the issue of eroticism is installed within a framework of women's social, political, and legal concerns, and the coquette can be read as an active site in which aspects of both the coquette and the protagonist are combined to form an innovative way of seeing the Victorian woman.

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