

# “Women”

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AND VICTORIA WIET

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**D**URING the 2018 MLA Conference, *Victorian Literature and Culture* circulated entries for their first “Keywords” issue. Reviewing them, we whispered to each other, “Where’s ‘women’? Where’s ‘gender’?” These topics were certainly addressed—“feminism,” “queer,” and “poetess” were included—but the absence of “women” was curious, particularly since “boy” and “animal” made the list. This omission is not limited to *VLC*, nor to Victorian studies. Institutionally, the overwriting of “women” occurs in the term’s removal from university departments’ and research centers’ titles. Are “women” disposable for Victorian studies—and academia at large?

“Women” and “woman” are increasingly vexed terms in twenty-first-century feminist and queer activist contexts, as suggested by heated debates surrounding the term “pregnant person” following the Supreme Court’s 2022 *Dobbs* decision. This revision allows institutions and thinkers to signal their recognition that the population requiring reproductive services includes trans men and nonbinary people. Several major news outlets published opinion pieces on this linguistic change, with many worrying that “pregnant person,” as Helen Lewis writes, “obscures the social dynamics at work in laws surrounding

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contraception, abortion, and maternal health.”<sup>1</sup> The curtailment of such rights is often fueled by misogyny, which cannot be conceptualized without “women” as a category.<sup>2</sup> We witness the reemergence of a field of discursive tension: between the coalitional power of the term “women” as used by feminists and the feminist goal to normalize inclusive language to honor marginalized experiences. While “women,” a category distinct from “men” or “persons,” preserves a strategic, coalitional, and experiential distinctiveness, “persons” avers that men and nonbinary people can become pregnant, sharing in experiences historically associated with femininity. Both are legitimate ways of using language, of clarifying that progressive feminism agitates against sexism and transphobia, of recognizing that trans men and nonbinary people also suffer from the current wave of hostility against reproductive rights.

We want to highlight that such categories need not be mutually exclusive—and that the category “women” remains relevant to Victorian studies. We advocate not for the ascendancy of the term “women,” nor its dominance over other, crucial terms like “trans” and “queer,” but simply for keeping it *in play*. Doing so enables strategic coalitions, historically precise scholarship, the recognition of trans women’s identities, and intersectional analyses.

Feminists since the second wave have debated the coherence and political viability of “women,” but this was not true of the Victorians. Much historical and literary scholarship has demonstrated how Victorian legal, political, and scientific discourses established “women” as an oppositional category to “men” and how Victorian activists framed campaigns for expanding property, custody, and labor rights around binary gender. Existing scholarship on “The Woman Question,” the “New Woman,” and “Odd Women” indicates the category’s centrality for the Victorian era. While scholars may eventually move on from these topics, the period’s texts signal that Victorians considered “women” a concrete legal and social category. What would the prelude of *Middlemarch* be without its meditation on “womanhood”?

Subsequent developments in queer and trans studies have expanded and fine-tuned the way Victorianists address issues of rights, sexuality, and lived experience.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical and historical spaces created for nonbinary, trans, and gender-fluid subjectivities, accompanied by the accelerating corrosion of the gender binary, especially among our Gen Z students, constitute potent routes for challenging sexism during our lifetimes. But what is lost when the term “women” disappears from the conversation? Such erasure replicates the same patriarchal dynamic

that, over time, devalues anything associated with the term “women,” anything smacking of femininity, be it the humanities, the teaching professions, or the right to control one’s fertility.

In light of the backlash against #MeToo and the overturning of *Roe*, Victorian studies loses something valuable when scholars and institutions drop “women” from their analyses and institutional nomenclature. Doing so removes the opportunity for what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism”: the opportunity to coalesce around shared concerns under a single political banner, with participants fully aware of that banner’s contingency, artificiality, and inability to represent everyone.<sup>4</sup> Victorian laws, just like ours, were written as if a group called “women” actually existed, and, by keeping “women” in play, scholars can work in historically precise ways while activating the strategic presentism for which many are calling.

“Women” has important political utility beyond cis-feminist contexts. Many trans-studies scholars maintain the usefulness of gendered categories, particularly “women,” for analyzing subjectivity and social relations. For Susan Stryker, transgender studies is queer theory’s “evil twin” because it “willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like *gay*. . . and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim.”<sup>5</sup> Julia Serano’s “Trans Woman Manifesto” defines “*trans woman*” as “any person who was assigned a male sex at birth, but who identifies as and/or lives as a woman.”<sup>6</sup> Serano considers trans activism a feminist movement, reasoning that “cissexism, transphobia, and homophobia” are “rooted in *oppositional sexism*, . . . the belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, “women” is an important category to retain. In the context of nineteenth-century Britain, examining laws and practices that targeted women doesn’t mean overlooking injustices against those who don’t fit into the modern category of “cis woman”; instead, they often illuminate the mechanisms disempowering gender-diverse people, like “female husbands” unable to inherit property or male-bodied sex workers subject to the Contagious Diseases Acts’ invasive medical examinations.

Finally, intersectional analyses lose specificity if Victorianists discard “women.” The term has been important to recent efforts to “undiscipline” our field. As Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy Wong argue, Victorian studies “has neither engaged nor cited the work of Black women (nor, for that matter, feminists of color more broadly).”<sup>8</sup> If, as Sara Ahmed writes, citation is “feminist memory,”<sup>9</sup> a

critical attention to gender and race categories ensures increased representation. It's a cruel coincidence that, just when literary texts written by and featuring women of color are becoming more visible, the deemphasis of "women" risks eliding crucial aspects of their experiences. Much work still needs to be done to explore particular forms of gendered and sexual violence faced by enslaved women like Mary Prince, or how other forms of marginality prevented Victorian-era women from claiming womanhood, particularly if they were nonwhite, poor, disabled, or old. Erasing "women"—and failing to interrogate its various uses *and* misuses, its utility for coalitional politics *and* its weaponization against trans people and people of color—threatens to renaturalize cis white women as the category's prototypes. We want to continue to keep "women" in play in Victorian studies because it's the category that, historically, people who didn't enjoy men's rights used to explain their political position, and it's one of the few English words with which we can renew a rallying cry for justice.

## NOTES

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6. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Cypress: Seal, 2007), 11.
7. Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 13, 16.
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