Sex and Sensibility in Cultural History: The English Governess and the Lunatic Asylum, 1845–1914

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This chapter is concerned with the experience of the Victorian governess and other female teachers in the lunatic asylum during the Victorian period. There is now a formidable and complex literature on the governess but little discussion of her experience behind the walls of the asylum. The chapter offers two kinds of comparison: the distinctive pattern of care of governesses in three different institutions in Victorian Devon; and secondly, the progress of those identified as ‘governess’ with other groups of female teachers in the same period. A number of interesting contrasts emerge. The evidence also indicates the importance of cultural and social influences in the construction of the persona of the female teacher.

Introduction

In the past two decades the claims of cultural history have made a significant impression on the ways in which historians undertake their work. Social historians who had previously been concerned to map out the journey of human beings across the landscape of the material world were compelled to acknowledge the importance of perspective; that the historian as well as the subject were creating a narrative of interpretation at a particular point in time and space. The impact of post-structural thinkers such as Michel Foucault on the practice of writing history has been vividly apparent in the debates on the history of insanity, where some recent research on demography and family arrangements has re-asserted the importance of the material world in the discovery and treatment of madness. Foucault’s claims with regard to the growth of scientific rationalism and its role in the history of the asylum has also remained the subject of debate. Roy Porter argued, for example, that it was the rise of
sensibility and the romantic pleasures at the end of the eighteenth century, which legitimated the 'empire of the imagination' and opened the door to psychiatric interpretations of sexual dilemmas.  

There remains a deep interest among social historians of madness in retrieving the voice of the mad subject from the various textual sources available to us, restoring them to a rational narrative of history. Feminist scholars have made a particularly important contribution to the understanding of gender relations in the construction of insanity. Elaine Showalter, Mary Poovey and Sally Shuttleworth amongst others have drawn on scientific as well as literary texts to explore the terms in which femininity and madness were represented in distinctive fields of knowledge and by different authors. Such cultural historians offer an impressive analysis of the anatomy of feminine melancholy in Victorian society, showing how the conflicting expectations of work and domestic duty created an epidemic of mental maladies amongst educated women. Showalter's particular contribution was to suggest that the feminisation of madness in the mid-nineteenth century was consolidated around the practice of male psychiatry and the institution of the new asylums founded in large numbers after 1845. In a brilliant discussion of the domestication of madness, Showalter suggested that the asylum was increasingly modelled around domestic imagery of comfort and behaviour, which associated recovery from insanity with a rediscovery of practical, home-making skills. The boundaries between what was regarded as a range of social institutions and conventions, including the lunatic asylum, policed the public and private spheres of feminine behaviour. Such institutions were also part of the political fabric of Victorian society and maintained the peculiar codes for recognising and attending to the needs of their clients.

A significant innovation in the mid-nineteenth-century period, as described by Showalter and Poovey amongst others, was the introduction of scientific methods and models, which provided a particular kind of factual rationale for social perception. The growth of psychiatry and other specialised branches of medicine offered an explanation for the working of the bodily economy within the political regime of commercial society. These comments are framed within a larger discussion of sanitary science and gendered practices within industrial societies, as states sought to irrigate the city and expand their scope for the control of disease and ignorance. Shuttleworth shows how the spread of anatomical realism influenced the development of literary character, as novelists used the language of social enquiry and scientific understanding to enlarge the interior