Doubt and the Victorian Woman

ELISABETH JAY

You will, I am sure, be relieved to know that I have limited my speculations under this catch-all title to women and doubt as examined in a few examples of imaginative literature from the second half of the nineteenth century. Since it is the intersection between women and doubt, between the feminine role and the capacity for intellectual scepticism, that interests me, I have not limited myself to the works of female authors, nor to those written from either an orthodox or a sceptical position. I have largely ignored the relation between authorial experience and literary product and related questions such as the reasons which might have led some women writers to incarnate the sceptical experience in male form.

What increasingly interested me was how often a degree of radicalism in theological speculation was accompanied by a conservative view of the feminine role. It is, of course, possible to argue that in the latter decades of the century scepticism itself became acceptable in what were otherwise relatively conservative intellectual circles. Moreover, the lurking suspicion of radicalism with which the French Revolution had tainted atheistical tendencies may well have made middle-class proponents of religious heterodoxy all the more anxious to prove that although doubt might topple the supreme patriarchal hegemony, it need not be subversive of human patriarchal ideologies.

One of the period’s classic texts justifying the traditional nature of woman’s position in the social hierarchy was in fact written by a man who had abandoned Christian orthodoxy seven years before he wrote Of Queen’s Gardens (1865). Woman’s desire to meddle with theology could not, therefore, be subsumed under the general heading of human pride of intellect. Instead, since Ruskin is always...
anxious to discriminate between the much-praised moral virtues and the doubtful intellectual probity of his orthodox religious upbringing, female speculation is denounced because it threatens to explode a particular view of the female role in society:

Strange, in creatures born to be Love visible, that where they can know least, they will condemn first, and think to recommend themselves to their Master, by crawling up the steps of His judgement-throne to divide it with Him. Strangest of all that they should think they were led by the Spirit of the Comforter into habits of mind which have become in them the unmixed elements of home discomfort; and that they dare turn the Household Gods of Christianity into ugly idols of their own; - spiritual dolls, for them to dress according to their caprice; and from which their husbands must turn away in grieved contempt, lest they should be shrieked at for breaking them.¹

Taken in conjunction with a passage from The Mystery of Life and Its Arts (1868) this hysterical denunciation would seem to suggest that any attempt by women to elevate themselves to intellectual authority on religious matters might turn the hearth from a temple of peace into an arena of guerrilla warfare. By 1868 Rose La Touche's incipient religious intolerance had begun to seem no less disquieting than Ruskin's mother's stern bigotry. The fear of social anarchy which underlies this plea for women as the orderly guardians of practical religious piety emerges in the ambiguity of syntax detectable in the passage I have quoted. Theologically speaking, the husband's concern should be only to express contempt for the women's empty speculations or 'spiritual dolls', but the sentence structure verges upon the suggestion that decent gender-defined behaviour is in danger as the husbands, with difficulty, refrain from physical violence directed against the wives themselves. The imminent grammatical chaos is a sign of logical despair.

It was easier for a man of orthodox faith to invent a theology to justify women's traditional position. The hero of Patmore's Angel in the House, having confronted the fear that love, even when sanctified by marriage, may conceal a form of idolatry worse than mere physical lust, resolves his doubts with this comforting formula: