



Gilbert, Pamela. *Victorian Skin: Surface, Self, History*.
Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 2019, 450 pp. £ 41.00
ISBN: 978-1-5017-3159-4

Reviewed by **Anna Brecke**

In *Victorian Skin: Surface, Self, History*, Pamela Gilbert approaches skin in the realist novel as a text where subjectivity, individual character, and affect are legible. She contextualises changing understanding of subjectivity across the Victorian period through the inherited trauma of the French Revolution and the Terror. Not only a consideration of the skin as a vexed site of subjectivity, this book is a history of the individual in relation to what Gilbert calls the *durée* of history as mediated through the organ of the skin - the location where individual subjects generate and absorb, knowledge, emotion, disease, sense of self. Gilbert explores the skin in four ways, “(1) skin as a surface for the sensing and expressive self; (2) as a permeable boundary; (3) as an alienable substance; and (4) as site of inherent and inscribed properties” (2). In each section of the book she weaves together an impressive tapestry of history, philosophy, and medicine to create multiple lenses for consideration of the skin in realist fiction as a surface where interiority becomes visible to interpretation.

Part One, “The Self as Surface”, offers background showing how changing medical and philosophical attitudes towards the relationship between mind and body created a sense of the mind or the soul that was located on the surface of the body. This section, comprised of the chapters “Sense” and “Expression”, focuses on the skin as a location of consciousness and a display of affect. “Sense” maps a shift towards viewing the skin as the “developmental origin of consciousness” (54), rather than a mere container or envelope for the physical and metaphysical interior self. The skin as consciousness is contextualised by new scientific ideas, Darwin and Charles Bell, and the Common Sense tradition. “Expression” builds on work such as Mary Ann O’Farrell’s *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth Century English Novel and the Blush*, to argue that the self-consciousness of the blush indicates much more than embarrassment. Gilbert considers gender, race, and sexuality as approaches to the blush, before bringing her analysis to works by poets, Richard Polwhele and Charles Tennyson Turner, and *Aurora Leigh*, and *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

Moving from affect to illness, Part Two “Permeability” considers the skin as a site of sanitation, health, and morality. The chapters “Out” and “In” address cutaneous manifestations of contamination from within and outside of the body. “Out” sees the skin as a place where internal illness or moral failing manifests. Theories of sanitation and porosity, as well as nineteenth century theories about the physical manifestations of generational venereal disease, provide context for readings of disfigured skins in in Doyle’s “The Third Generation”, *Cousin Betty*, and *Nana*. “In” addresses the relationship between porous skin and external contaminants. Bathing, classism, and

“imperial manhood” come to bear on the skin in this section. Gilbert also reconnects with the Terror through changing interpretations of Marat’s deadly bath reading for political or emotional infection through metaphors of contagion as depicted by Dickens in *Tale of Two Cities*.

In the most grisly section of the book, Part Three “Alienated and Alienating”, Gilbert explores the separation of the skin from the body in chapters titled “Flayed” and “Flaying”. “Flayed” fictional body objects, like the skin from Collins’ *The Law and the Lady*, rumours of flayed bodies during the Terror, and the fundamental strangeness of such objects, as truly alienated commodities. Gilbert argues the literally commodified body in fiction “becomes a fetish rather than a relic, blurs the boundaries of human and beast” (195) and becomes a “significant object” rather than an oddity or commodity. “Flaying” considers the Victorian fascination with the Marsyas myth, . Marsyas’ story represents the individual sacrificed to historical change through the physical removal of the sensing and expressing surface of the body.

Part Four, “Inscriptions”, perhaps the most literal exploration of legibility and the skin, addresses marks not inherent to the natural body in the form of scars and tattoos. In this section Gilbert draws on the growing nineteenth century discipline of criminality and a desire for stable visual markers to identify criminals. Gilbert addresses the use of a new form of physiognomy – anthropometry - and scars in early attempts to produce criminal databases prior to the importation of the fingerprint system from the colonies. Scars were considered more reliable than early photography but less reliable than fingerprints. In her discussion of tattoos, Gilbert maps the way in which they occupied various cultural spaces through the progression of the period. Beginning as a habit of soldiers and sailors, indicating travel, and closing with the fin de siècle fad of tattooing amongst the aristocracy that brought working class western tattooing into the orbit of the upper classes. In literature, she examines tattoos in *Mr Meeson’s Will* and *A Laodicean* where they serve different purposes. *Mr Meeson’s Will* features a very literal “body as text” when a young woman has a will tattooed on her body and thus becomes a living document. Hardy’s *A Laodicean* uses the tattoo to symbolize all three aforementioned ways the tattoo was considered in the period. Contradictory beliefs of skin come through in this chapter- first that identity is inscribed in the skin and needs only to be read and interpreted and second that surface appearance was mutable, tied to human growth/ evolution of the soul, and could change over time (317).

Fundamentally an argument that in realist fiction “the surface of the body, posited at once as radically transparent to interpretation and as obscure, is made pivotal and offered to the reader as a puzzle to be solved” (7), it is perhaps unsurprising that this work opens and closes by addressing the centrality of George Eliot. Gilbert claims that Eliot “is always concerned to show that if skin signals meaning, its meaning cannot be read” (351). Throughout the book Gilbert returns to her central claim that “nineteenth century realism engages the materialist body in relation to history” (352). She notes that the close of the period marks another shift from surface to depth, and brings these concerns forward through the advent of psychoanalysis, modernist narrative, and into our current moment. The depth and breadth of Gilbert’s study approaches skin as a surface, a permeable membrane, an object alienable from the body, and as a location for reading identity. The scope of this work, and the wide variety of texts examined within, makes it valuable to anyone engaged in study of Victorian fiction, poetry, or social history.

Recommended citation:

Brecke, Anna. 2019. Review of *Victorian Skin: Surface, Self, History*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 2019. *Victorian Popular Fictions* 1.2: 167-168. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/MGNA3456>
Date Published: 31 December 2019