

MARY POOVEY, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formations, 1830–1864*. CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. 1995. 264 PAGES.  
*Reviewed by Brian Flint*

In *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* Mary Poovey tries to make sense of the emerging “mass culture” in Victorian England. Poovey argues the British social domain was reconceptualized by 1860 into “similar, self-regulating individuals” (22). She quotes Robert Chambers in explaining that “every man, no matter what his position, is imposed *Individual Responsibility*” (22). Poovey demonstrates the emergence of this social body through a collection of essays and an examination of contemporary novels.

Poovey discusses how the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of factories, and the rise of capitalism created a new organization of space (25). This “abstract space” changed how people interacted with each other both in the factory and in the neighborhoods. Poovey expands on a metaphor mentioned in Chapter Two describing society as a human body. First she describes the social body in terms of differentiation and displacement, or “the differentiation of the national *us* from aliens within and without, and the displacement of other interests of consciousness” (55–56). The social body is then analyzed through the writings of James Phillips Kay, who uses

the body metaphor to describe society's ailments. Kay's symptoms include pauperism, "popular tumults," and the outbreak of Asiatic Cholera (57). These are all used literally and figuratively to describe the population as a single entity.

Poovey argues British society showed signs of a Foucauldian "disciplinarian individualism," which she describes as "that paradoxical configuration of agency that is constituted as "voluntary" (99). She examines the actions of Thomas Chalmers, a preacher, and the management of the New Poor Law by Edwin Chadwick. Chalmers preached in opposition of the government's increasing intrusion into church matters. Poovey argues while Chalmers is preaching in support of Foucault's disciplinary individualism, the apparatus required to accommodate those he wished to help created the very bureaucracy he preached against (105). Chadwick sought to manage the New Poor Law in a way that would not "deprive poor individuals of their agency, but to ensure that they would act freely—according, that is to the laws of the market" (107). Poovey suggests the actions of Chalmers and Chadwick helped, through their paradoxical nature, to normalize disciplinary individualism (114).

Poovey then examines Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*. Poovey states that documents like Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* "contributed to the consolidation of class identities during a period in which the economic basis of wealth and the political basis of citizenship were both undergoing revision." Poovey continues: "Chadwick reveals one of the most important paradoxes of this process, for he simultaneously condemns members of the working class for failing to live up to middle-class standards and suggests that the poor are—and will remain—fundamentally different" (117). Chadwick's sanitary plan limited the ability of the working class to organize politically as the middle-class had done (130). Poovey argues that historians are not entirely accurate when they point to this as the reason there was no effective labor class organization in the nineteenth century but rather the political challenges at the time were eventually replaced with battles over the "rights of women to own property, to divorce, and to enter the labor force" (131).

The final two chapters deal with contemporary novelists who attempted to portray British society. Poovey uses Benjamin Disraeli's *Coningsby* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* to show how each author misinter-

prets the contemporary debate over the condition of England but in doing so advance the idea of a psychological domain akin to Robert Chambers' *Individual Responsibility*. Poovey writes "as Disraeli and Gaskell exposed the limitations of political- and social-economic contributions to the condition-of-England debate, they began to adumbrate a domain conceptually adjacent" to the domains described by their contemporaries (153).

Examining Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, Poovey argues "if the virtue men assigned to female nature proved to be only a figment of men's desire, then it might be possible that the sexed body did not guarantee moral difference" (174). Basically, the equality of women argued for by many during this period is reinforced by Dickens in the sense that gender does not define or limit morality or virtue.

In Chapter One Poovey argues that, in the nineteenth century, British society emerges as a group of similar, self-regulating individuals akin to Chambers' *Individual Responsibility*. She then makes her case through a series of essays and the examination of novels. While these selections offer a varied and detailed glimpse at an evolving British society and how it is viewed by contemporary people of different stations, the reader is left with an erratic and somewhat confused understanding of her thesis. The book ends with the eighth chapter, devoid of any concluding remarks. It would have been of great service to her thesis to spend a few pages tying all of the essays together.