



Famine And Fashion: Needlewomen In The Nineteenth Century

Beth Harris

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Like the figure of the governess, the seamstress occupied a unique place in the history of the nineteenth century, appearing frequently in debates about women's work and education, and the condition of the working classes generally in the rapidly changing capitalist marketplace. Like the governess, the figure of the needlewoman is ubiquitous in art, fiction and journalism in the nineteenth century. The fifteen articles in this book address the seamstress's appearance as a 'real' figure in the changing economies of nineteenth-century Britain, America, and France, and as an important cultural icon in the art and literature of the period. They treat the many different types of needlewomen in the nineteenth century—from skilled milliners and dressmakers, some of whom owned their own businesses selling merchandise to other women (forming a unique 'female economy') to women who, through reduced circumstances, were forced into the lowest end of paid needlework, sewing clothing at home for starvation wages—like the impoverished shirt-maker in the famous Victorian poem by Thomas Hood, 'The Song of the Shirt.' This volume assembles the work of leading American, British and Canadian scholars from many different fields, including art history, literary criticism, gender studies, labor history, business history, and economic history to draw together recent scholarship on needlewomen from a variety of different disciplines and methodologies. Famine and Fashion will therefore appeal to anyone studying images of work in the nineteenth century, popular and canonical nineteenth-century literature, the history of women's work, the history of sweated labor, the origins of the ready-made clothing industry and early feminism.

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