

**BOOK REVIEW:** Emelyne Godfrey, *Femininity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature and Society: From Dagger-Fans to Suffragettes* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 192 pp., 978-0-230-30031-6, £50.00. [Simon J. James]

Many *Wellsian* readers will be familiar with Society member Emelyne Godfrey's previous book, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature: Duelling with Danger* (recently reissued in paperback), and many may also have recently seen her very informative and entertaining article on *Ann Veronica* and ju-jitsu in the *Times Literary Supplement*. A very impressive mere three years after this last book, Godfrey turns to the other side of the story with *Femininity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature and Society: From Dagger-Fans to Suffragettes*. Whereas in the earlier volume, the threats of violence to the hegemonic male self usually manifested themselves in various forms of otherness (such as 'the foreigner', proverbially more prone to reaching for a dastardly knife, in contrast to trusty British bare fists) here the adversary is consistently identified as male, whether in the form of stranger, sexual predator or even the Victorian state, in the form of the policeman (as told in the compelling section on suffragism and self-defence).

The choice of 'Victorian' rather than 'Edwardian' in the title is a curious one, since, unlike the companion volume, much of the material discussed here dates from after the turn of the century. The thread on which the book's different pearls are strung is, pleasingly, is H. G. Wells's 1909 New Woman *après-la-lettre* novel *Ann Veronica*. The analysis repeatedly returns to different aspects and episodes from the novel: the greater freedom granted to the heroine by masculine climbing gear, rather than more ladylike but constricting outfits; her repelling of decidedly unwanted advances in the private room of a restaurant; unsatisfactory tanglings with the police and the suffragette movement; the importance of *Ann Veronica*'s enjoyment of walking, tennis, badminton, hockey and martial arts. If, for novelist and activist Mona Caird, 'meek women are doing violence to themselves' (63) it is crucial for Wells's heroine that she should be 'a girl who can sustain hard knocks' (87).

A number of themes recur across the material discussed, which is both factual and fictional. One is the self's negotiation of private and public space. The topography of the city, as readers of Wells's novel will know, both gives the female self a greater degree of liberty from the Ruskinian prison of domesticity, but also makes her vulnerable to the male gaze – bulging eyes recur as the most common trope for representing male sexual desire in the tacit self-censorship of fiction during this period. There is a great deal here of male surveillance of female bodies, whether the idle voyeurism of the *flâneur* or the more concerted scrutiny of suffragettes by the police. Female self-defence both provided a means of resistance to threats of violence against the individual, and also a cover for collective political activity: the marriage of ju-jitsu classes and political protest is one of the most fascinating passages of the book's narrative.

The story told here is contextualised in precise detail both in time and place – the propinquity of historical dates and (especially London) place names allows all manner of fascinating connections between literary and cultural history to be made. Godfrey shows herself to be equally adept in both disciplines: some chapters show clearly the results of hard historical graft in the numerous archives consulted, but there is also engagement with literary form and technique, as in the shrewd observation that in the choice of narrative point of view on suffragette protest, 'Wells sniggers at the women from afar; Robins focuses on their emotions' (76). The meanings of objects such as hat-pins, dog-whips and fans, and even the reading of faces, take on new and rich levels of meaning in the accounts of these stories, in which women assert the right not to be considered as property themselves.

A number of key texts here – Mona Caird's *The Wing of Azrael*, Elizabeth Robins's *Where Are You Going To?*, Richard Marsh's *The Adventures of Judith Lee* – will be unfamiliar to many scholars, so inevitably much of the excavatory work here takes the form of plot summary – but for this reader at least, my appetite for these stories and others besides was sufficiently stimulated to want to read them in their original form. Godfrey's case is principled without being polemical for its own sake: accounts of child abuse, sexual assault, urban violence and political disempowerment are triangulated with thought-provoking observations upon contemporary fiction and society. The work of the other scholars consulted is conscientiously and generously acknowledged, but really the only other book like this is one is the earlier by Godfrey herself: to produce another piece of work so scholarly but which is also such an enthralling read is a very impressive achievement indeed.