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Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs

Carol Mavor

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An intimate look into three Victorian photo-settings, *Pleasures Taken* considers questions of loss and sexuality as they are raised by some of the most compelling and often misrepresented photographs of the era: Lewis Carroll's photographs of young girls; Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs of Madonnas; and the photographs of Hannah Cullwick, a "maid of all work," who had herself pictured in a range of masquerades, from a blackened chimney sweep to a bare-chested Magdalene. Reading these settings performatively, Carol Mavor shifts the focus toward the subjectivity of these girls and women, and toward herself as a writer. Mavor's original approach to these photographs emphatically sees sexuality where it has been previously rendered invisible. She insists that the sexuality of the girls in Carroll's pictures is not only present, but deserves recognition, respect, and scrutiny. Similarly, she sees in Cameron's photographs of sensual Madonnas surprising visions of motherhood that outstrip both Victorian and contemporary understandings of the maternal as untouchable and inviolate, without sexuality. Finally she shows how Hannah Cullwick, posing in various masquerades for her secret paramour, emerges as a subject with desires rather than simply a victim of her upper-class partner. Even when confronting the darker areas of these photographs, Mavor perseveres in her insistence on the pleasures taken—by the viewer, the photographer, and often by the model herself—in the act of imagining these sexualities. Inspired by Roland Barthes, and drawing on other theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, Mavor creates a text that is at once interdisciplinary, personal, and profoundly pleasurable.

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