



Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability

(Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture)

Gowan Dawson

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The success of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories in mid-nineteenth-century Britain has long been attributed, in part, to his own adherence to strict standards of Victorian respectability, especially in regard to sex. Gowan Dawson contends that the fashioning of such respectability was by no means straightforward or unproblematic, with Darwin and his principal supporters facing surprisingly numerous and enduring accusations of encouraging sexual impropriety. Integrating contextual approaches to the history of science with work in literary studies, Dawson sheds light on the well-known debates over evolution by examining them in relation to the murky underworlds of Victorian pornography, sexual innuendo, unrespectable freethought and artistic sensualism. Such disreputable and generally overlooked aspects of nineteenth-century culture were actually remarkably central to many of these controversies. Focusing particularly on aesthetic literature and legal definitions of obscenity, Dawson reveals the underlying tensions between Darwin's theories and conventional notions of Victorian respectability.

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