sense of much left unsaid, implied or stated in the fewest possible words is refreshing; I greatly admired, for example, the sentence and a half in which Ingham points out that the North of England represents at once a place, a period of achieved industrial revolution, and a set of values centred on entrepreneurial skill and self-help, made problematic by the need to reconcile such values with the conditions they create for workers. In the clarity of its argument, the sophistication of its reading and the compactness of its prose, *The Language of Gender and Class* is a significant contribution to the continuing analysis of the importance and the social effectivity of fiction in the nineteenth century.

Response

Patricia Ingham

The three readings of *The Language of Gender and Class* by Penny Boumelha, Linda Shires and Rachel Bowlby are illustrations of the fluidity of all texts: not only Victorian novels but critical books about them are clearly polysemic. All three critics largely agree with what they have read but each has read a somewhat different text.

All accept my general argument that the widely used assertion that class and gender are intertwined in the Victorian novel is borne out by my detailed scrutiny of six of them. They further accept that the chapters on individual novels demonstrate nonetheless shifts in these intertwinings which eventually open up new ways of treating both semantic areas. Shires, however, takes issue with me for appearing to make the novel "develop in a literary greenhouse" and for ignoring the fact that "the poetry of the period is also undoing the knot of class and gender." This latter point is perfectly true but it is allowed for within my claim that "it is at the level of symbolism and rhetoric that ideological codings can begin to break down" (27). Obviously such characteristics are not exclusive to fictional prose narratives nor would the inclusion of poetic texts do more than elaborate my thesis. The work is essentially offered as one model for the analysis of texts in order to test the axiom that "to examine gender is to embark on a historical analysis of power which includes the formation of class." Naturally the model would be applicable to poetry and other kinds of writing but, as Shires herself points out approvingly, my study "treats generic structure as signifying practice as well as signifying system" and I attend "to the social importance of genres in structuring specific social meanings and [show] how certain examples of a genre challenge familiar conventions of story, characterisation, narration and audience expectation." This meant that I divided the analysis of the chosen novels into the sections which form each chapter. To do the same for another genre within the same book would have resulted in an account so complicated as to obscure the argument and more particularly the model that I offer. The intention was to provide detailed illustrations of my particular approach with as much clarity as possible. All three reviewers agree that clarity prevailed and for that I am happy to accept as true Penny Boumelha's criticism that a "clean, spare, occasionally tart" style can result at times in "a certain bald assertiveness." I shall take this to heart for the future, and even in this response.

Shires, a distinguished writer on narratology, has offered her own schematic model in *Telling Stories* (1988). Consequently I think she misinterprets mine since, as my title indicates, it was meant to show that all shifts in semiotic systems work on the same basis as linguistic change. It is not merely that "certain novelists" have "authorial idiolects" but that every utterance is a combination of the personal with the communal system (which is itself an abstraction). This combination creates the individual idiolect that for instance we recognise when we hear a voice on the telephone. It is only as a result of individual variations of sound, form and meaning, which may unpredictably spread to a group, then larger communities and then enter the communal system, that change takes place in the latter. In speaking of transformation of the conventional signs for women, workers and social unrest in the Victorian novel this is the pattern of development involved. Some of the treatments of gender and class, such as those of the six novels that I discuss, affect the common language in which they can be handled by extending its semantic range. All three reviewers agree that the changes I describe take place but only Boumelha foregrounds the process of linguistic change as the book was meant to do.

The source of semantic change in language is the varying contexts in which meanings of a sign occur. Bakhtin puts it in an extreme form: "the meaning of a word is entirely determined by its context." What this statement means can be variously illustrated. First, by the two sentences

(a) My --- gave birth to me on Friday the thirteenth.

(b) I love my --- .

In (a) the semantic power of what totally predictably fills the blank is zero. In (b) it is very high because the extensive range of possible options leaves it virtually unpredictable. An alternative example would be the power of context to avoid certain ambiguities with a polyvalent word like sense: "My sense of smell is poor"; "Entering the darkened room I had a sense of something wrong"; "The sense of the meeting is clearly against this rule"; "Going out into the rain bareheaded shows you've got no sense"; "The sense of this paragraph is that men are mortal." As these several examples show, the sentences/syntactic patterns into which words are placed are a major factor in determining meaning. So when Shires glosses my use of "narrative syntax" to mean "the structuring of events into plot," she is not fully capturing my meaning as spelt out in chapter two: "The advantage that novels have over other kinds of writing is that they place signs within a narrative which, like the syntactic frame of a sentence, attempts to determine and control meaning. Plots . . . are part of the method of reaccenting signs" (27). Shires asks for more consideration of "the relationship of syntagmatic events . . . how events get placed side by side in *Shirley*, say." Her example suggests that juxtaposition is the key to understanding narrative syntax. But syntactic patterns are only apparently linear; structurally they are hierarchical. The same linear form can in fact have more than one hierarchy depending on the meanings. "Rich old men and women" can be analysed as "rich old (men and women)," "rich (old men) and women," or "(rich old men) and women" depending on who is rich and who is old. This is why, as Boumelha points out, I recognise "a more and a less conventional narrative syntax" which gives contradictory meanings to *Hard Times*; or I point to a connection between Louisa Bounderby's near fall into adultery and her husband's much later economic decline. Juxtaposition is only one factor in the shaping of a syntactic frame; non-linear relationships are more important.

I have found all three reviews productive, particularly Boumelha's reference to a sometimes over-economical style and Shires's suggestion that my approach should be widened to consider the related but different genre represented by poetic writing of the same period. But the most thought-provoking comment was made by Bowlby when she addressed an area I had, as I see it, necessarily not moved on to. She draws attention to a question she believes is the "ultimate outcome" of my argument: what comes next after the shifts that I describe in the language for representing women and the working class which subjected them to a constricting devaluation undeserved by them as individuals because of the group to which they belong? Bowlby claims that the inference is left open for readers to conclude that the individuals in question are expected "to be freed from subjection to the devaluations inflicted on him or her." In effect she asks whether I am claiming the possibility of a future utopia in which these individuals would be "free from the divisions [in their identity] produced or forced by such intolerable pressures." She refers in particular to what I say of Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*: that she is "a woman whose intellectual liberation is debilitated by the failure of emotions (conditioned by the artificial compulsions of her time) to keep up with her opinions" (176). This, she thinks, suggests that I look forward to "an undivided self . . . inhabiting a world without change in which gender and class, among other things, were settled once and for all."

This is not an inference that I accept as following from my argument. The removal of certain historically specific constraints on the construction and representation of gender and class which induce internal as well as external devaluing of individuals does not necessarily imply that this will be followed by a unified, stable and unconflicted self. Nor will the earlier type of representations cease entirely. There will merely result, as is pointed out in the final chapter of the book, variants which create flux in the representation of gender and class in novelistic discourse "out of which new signs would emerge into the communal system" (182). No-one with a knowledge of the unstoppable, untidy and unpredictable nature of linguistic change, on which my account depends, could believe in a fixed and stable novelistic language of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, religion, etc. New variants will co-exist alongside the old and the answer to the question of which will remain or disappear is not predictable. It is perfectly evident that in the late twentieth century reworking of signs for women to reaccent them pejoratively is a profitable journalistic activity. Examples are: "post-feminist" woman happy not to be not merely fully sexual being but a sexual object; and a "post-feminist" woman who has discovered that "liberation" means domesticity and submission.

In examining shifts in the intertwining of class and gender in the Victorian novel, I was working towards a more integrated approach to such issues in criticism. Other issues interlock with these and a historically specific analysis is needed to reveal the nature of the knotty relationships between them instead of giving priority to one and regarding the rest as parallels. All three reviews, despite their different emphases, understand the argument and take it seriously. Each offers the kind of constructive discussion that suggests useful questions to pursue for both reader and writer.