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0521593239 - Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels

Pamela K. Gilbert

Excerpt

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Introduction

Hayden White, among others, observes that the narration of history is determined more by the needs of the historian than intrinsic properties of historical data.¹ Regarding the burgeoning critical fascination with transgression and boundaries, as evidenced by the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, Donna Haraway and many others,² it is justifiable to ask, not only why boundary transgression is such a central metaphor in the periods we study, but why it is such a central – almost obsessive – concern to us now. We see it, most obviously, in the discourse on AIDS. Yet it is prevalent everywhere, from abortion rights (where does the individual body end and the social body begin?) to information security (in what consists the boundary between private and public?). In the rapidly shifting international political climate, as in the multicultural US, we see it in the obsessive attempts to categorize and rename, adding strings of adjectives in an attempt to “get it right,” only to discover that identity is fluid and multiple, and resists naming. From national boundaries under dispute to the attempts of multinational corporations to disentangle their agendas from other interests, from feminist attempts to speak for “all women” to the efforts of women of color and lesbians to be heard as distinct, but still collective voices, identity politics consist of a quest to distinguish the Self from the Other, only to discover a multitude of others and a myriad of selves. In a global economy and ecology, wherein cultural and communicative structures become ever more immediate and diffuse, the terms “national” and “individual” lose meaning as rapidly as do terms like “private” or “woman.” Perhaps this is why such labels are so highly charged. In the loss of these “clear” definitions (which after all were never really all that clear), we fear the loss of an identity that, however inadequately, *worked* for many of us. As these easy distinctions are divested of their perceived clarity, and therefore, their utility, they are invested with all the energy of a nostalgia for a loss not yet fully actualized, but dimly foreseen.

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We are and have been in the midst of a paradigm shift. As boundaries between constructed categories (self/other; man/woman; history/fiction; near/far) become more permeable, and therefore more visible, our attention is drawn to those boundaries. Their very insubstantiality buttresses their importance, calls forth our anxiety. Our need to define is driven by their insusceptibility to definition. We poke obsessively at the walls we have erected in order to test their strength, and are both thrilled and appalled when all that was solid melts into air. From metaphors of depth, we move to metaphors of surfaces, a fascination with transgression. The body, our most basic cultural unit of enclosure and difference between self and other, is a text in which this drama of colliding and blending surfaces is written and read. The attention given in recent films to interracial and other “forbidden” sexual relationships demonstrates this, as does the concern with image and substance, body and machine in films as diverse as the *Terminator* series and *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. These are hardly new themes; indeed, it is their very centrality to contemporary cultures that makes them effective. They are basic concerns which are periodically foregrounded, coming into sharper focus in periods of particular tensions. This very current interest focuses historians’ critical attention on earlier cultures’ perceptions of boundaries, their constructions of transgression and its gains and costs.

Mid-Victorian imperial Britain often constructed its identity as active, healthy, and masculine versus foreign identities which were passive, fevered, or feminine. Yet Britain, in order to define its culture in this way, required Others: its colonial possessions and its ancestral continental rivals. Imperial ambition coupled with nineteenth-century capitalism, however, created a trans-class and transcultural “circulation” which threatened to break down the barriers of secure distinctions between upper and lower classes, British and foreign, colonizer and colonized. Like Rochester in his relation to the Creole madwoman, the upper class Englishman faced the terrifying prospect of difference, not merely in the West Indies, but in his own home, perhaps in his own mirror. The rhetoric of inviolable British domesticity becomes both the parent and opponent of sensation fiction, drawing together concerns of national identity, the inviolability of the body, and the clarity of gender and class distinctions.

Central urban space is often perceived by Victorians as a space of “promiscuous” intercourse between the classes, even as, for example, London’s outlying areas to the east (and southeast) such as Whitechapel and Southwark are marked by industrial abjection, racial Otherness

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and crime, and suburbs to the west like Chelsea represent an uneasy blend of respectability and petty-bourgeois transgression. Mrs. Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Gissing, and many other novelists carefully map the classed trajectories within this urban space only to disrupt those careful boundaries with the deadly collisions of characters such as Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*. The blurring of class-distinctive space takes on new meaning under the pressure of sanitary and personal safety concerns. Literacy, no longer itself a clear indicator of class, is redefined as prose fiction becomes a major and largely urban industry, marketing across the class spectrum. The classed topography of genre nostalgically reproduces the imaginary classed geography of pre-industrial rural space; the hierarchy of “taste” which anticipates modern day “canonical” discussions replaces the apparently simpler distinctions of literate versus illiterate. The blending of boundaries and the shrinkage of previously “inviolable” spaces heightens – as conflict always does – awareness of boundaries: contact becomes associated with contagion, which, as Stallybrass and White write, “become[s] . . . [a] trope . . . through which city life is apprehended.”³ The equally promiscuous exchange of intellectual and cultural material in literature, especially the movement of periodical literatures across a mixed-class audience, provokes a similar anxiety regarding the contagion of ideas, dangerous infections in the body politic. The domestic space comes to represent an isolated enclosure, a “pure,” closed, middle-class English body and mind embattled against the encroaching forces of disease, revolution, and worst of all, in George Eliot’s words, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” This body was female, but as a male possession represented a point of entry through which the patriarchal body might suffer disease and ultimately emasculation, just as the erring wife represented a threat to the purity and control of the patrilinear transfer of name and wealth.

In the 1860s, the sensation genre, and the novelists and novels identified with it, provides one clear and historically well-documented instance in which the movement of these anxieties and the rhetorics which encode and create them can be traced in the construction of genre and the gendered and classed author, reader, and text. This movement can be traced both within the novels themselves and other cultural discourses which parallel and interpenetrate them (critical reviews and general literary discussions as well as non-literary articles concerned with the body and health, both individual and cultural). Genre is a category that has less to do with intrinsic properties of

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particular texts than the needs and concerns of readers reading those texts – a particular era and cultural group, its concatenation of fears and desires and market forces which take shape from and feed those trends. Generic categorization and slippage between categories mark a particular point of interest since the act of naming is also an act of reading the bodies of authors and readers by whom the text is produced and consumed. The sensation genre is a category of readings particularly concerned with violation of the domestic body, with class and gender transgression, and most importantly, with the violation of the privileged space of the reader/voyeur, with the text's reaching out to touch the reader's body, acting directly "on the nerves." The subsequent evolution of popular genres related to the sensation genre and its authors reflects a set of beliefs about femaleness, reading, the fiction market, and a host of related constructs.

In the following pages, I follow a "top-down" approach, beginning with an investigation of the role of the middle-class popular novel and attitudes toward reading, a broadly ranging discussion of attitudes toward the book, the body, the industry of culture, and cultural health, as they are discernable in popular middle class journals such as the *Athenaeum*, *The Spectator*, and *Blackwood's*. The theories of the body which I have found most productive are those of Bakhtin and Foucault, as developed by feminist and poststructuralist thinkers – fundamentally a social-constructionist view of the body as a text and gender as a reading. Some readers may find incongruous, then, my references to Julia Kristeva or even to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whose "emergent metaphors" may seem suspiciously essentialist, or my frequent borrowings of psychoanalytically based frameworks for the discussion of Self and Other. However, I find these frames not basically incompatible. The body and its gender are texts which have been read in certain ways for a very long time in what we loosely term "Western culture"; psychoanalytic thought has provided compelling and profoundly useful bases for meta-commentary on that reading. If that reading has become so powerful an institution as to acquire the privileged status of "nature," then so much more does such a reading demand our attentive critique. The status of ontological truth-claims of any theoretical perspectives, no matter how much or how little we cherish them, should not distract the feminist from her or his bricolage, from the quest for the perspectives, however multiple, most presently productive. In a work and era that celebrates transgression, there is some latitude for theoretical miscegenations and their odd progeny.

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Moving on to issues of content, as with any limited project, this one leaves more out than in. Specifically, I am focusing on urban, white, middle-class, British writers. The classed, gendered, and colonized body is seen always from that vantage point. However, the texts that I do examine represent a market both devalued (as feminine and trivial) and economically dominant. The influence of the middle-class popular novel industry was far reaching, extending anywhere English and German (and to a lesser extent French and Italian) were read. It is therefore with these texts, and their construction of the body that I begin.

Within modernity, the body has been our most basic text for the reading of self, and the boundaries of our bodies are our primary *loci* for distinguishing self from not-self. Ingresses and egresses of the body are points of contact between self and not-self, places where we interact with Otherness in the dangerous process of becoming self, or vice versa. Other, less concrete, kinds of contact – the exchange of ideas, for example – are figured forth as and metaphorically aligned with the transgression or crossing-over of the body's boundaries. Since bodies are gendered, aged, classed, and so forth, these metaphors participate in these entailments; thus, for example, if reading provocative articles for pleasure is made analogous to promiscuous casual intercourse with delightful, seductive partners, the other entailments of this metaphor (moral judgments, for example) may be quite different if the reader is envisioned as a young, aristocratic man from the way they might be were the reader seen as a young, unmarried, middle-class woman. It is almost impossible to imagine a mid-nineteenth-century critic portraying a young woman reader favorably as the central figure of this analogy.

Having explored a discursive arena within which the spectacle of the body and the body reading may be interpreted, I define transgression, its relation to disease and the metaphors of space and movement which order it. I then place the social construction of genre within this arena, examining its power to produce readings consonant with the demands of a particular cultural moment, through its actualization of powerful discursive structures (metaphors of disease, for example). If the definition of a genre, and of certain texts as generic, is a social construction, i.e., a reading, then it participates in all of the entailments of readings as defined in chapter one – genres, like texts, authors, and readers, are gendered, classed, and so forth. A genre is a meta-reading, or a set of reading instructions, that coexists with a text and limits the range of its multiplicity. One productive way to expose both the imperatives of a genre and their roots in social values and concerns is to seek a different

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generic reading of the same text; an extended example is given in chapter 3, in the section dealing with *Lady Audley's Secret*. Impossible though it may be to read beyond or “outside” of *any* set of reading instructions, nevertheless, by shifting to another set of instructions – in effect, an alternative subject position – while maintaining awareness of the difference between that reading and the reading framed by the original genre, the reader enables her/himself to see that other set of instructions at work, much as one brings to view the normally hidden formatting commands in a word-processed text file.

We move from the general discussion of genre as concept and social phenomenon to a discussion of three very diverse sub-genres of the sensation period, three novels and authors which particularly exemplify them, and to questions of why and how this was so. Through close analysis of each of these novels and the ways in which they are positioned within their discursive environment, it is possible to discern the social forces which constructed the sensation movement, and the ways in which issues of “high” versus “low” culture (or canonical versus non-canonical texts) are defined on bases other than “intrinsic” textual properties. Analysis of one later (post-sensation) popular novel by each of the three authors provides both opportunities for comparison and examples of how authors who made their debuts in the sensation genre and were defined by their association with it later attempted to control the positioning of the texts within the marketplace. In each of these texts and sub-genres, the female body as the contested site of representation and consumption is ostentatiously foregrounded, as the status of a primarily woman-representing, woman-produced, and woman-consumed popular culture is in the process of determination.

The sensation genre, a category of reading which spanned the decade of the 1860s, is a topic of growing interest to literary scholars and feminist scholars across the disciplines today. Dominated by women writers, as much of the popular fiction market in the Victorian period was, the sensation novel generated a great deal of critical opprobrium and reader interest in its time. Many sensation novels written for the middle class audience became runaway bestsellers. Overnight successes like *Lady Audley's Secret* had also the distinction of remaining bestsellers over time. Yet they were designated “trash” by critics then and that appellation stuck. The process by which these texts have been rendered non-canonical has, in fact, much to do with the perception of their genre as a “feminine” one.

In choosing particular authors, I have a number of aims in mind.

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Rhoda Broughton and Ouida (Marie Louise de la Rame or Ramée) are writers who exemplify Victorian popular literary tastes, and who are underread. M. E. Braddon is finally getting more critical interest, but while *Lady Audley's Secret* has been elevated to the level of para-canon, the rest of Braddon's impressive and worthwhile *oeuvre* is sadly neglected. These novels offer a rich complexity and intelligent commentary on the culture they represent and create, and one of my aims is to offer readings which situate the novels within the constraints of the market which they enter without reducing the texts to mere exempla of generic formulae created to describe and contain them, formulae which were never identical with any of these texts, and which were cannily invoked, subtly mocked, and opportunistically disregarded by turns by authors and readers seeking to define themselves against or within the market (or both). However, my aim is also not just to recoup part of what Elaine Showalter identified as a "Literature of Their [Our?] Own" (and Showalter is notoriously hard on "minor" authors),⁴ although I think such a project entirely worthwhile, nor is it to indulge in the revisionist process which consists of discovering feminist foremothers in unlikely places; my focus is not biographical. One of the most serious failures of feminist criticism as a corpus is its tendency, even today, to focus principally on authorial biography, a practice which unintentionally replicates the traditional sexist tendency to read canonical male-authored texts as self-contained "art" and female-authored texts as simple extensions or reflections of personal experience. However, I am interested in the "author function" associated with these women, a function whose gender, not incidentally dependent on the biological sex of these authors, was implicated in the construction of their readership, their market position, their generic placement, and finally their position outside the "canon" – and the construction of the canon itself. Hence, the fact that these are female authors makes, as well as is, a difference. That these are three very different authors writing six very diverse novels dramatizes the power of the construction of both sensation as a genre and the concept of the "popular" in the reading of culture, then and now, to contain them in a structure of kinship. These authors, all with long-term, extremely successful contemporaneous careers, together provide an exemplary survey of work in women's popular novels in this period outside the realist domestic and industrial novels legitimated by George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell and others who have maintained a tenuous, but continuous place, at least in a feminist canon if not a mainstream one. Each novel herein examined was successful, in most

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cases, extremely so, and each represents key points in the novelist's career and her relation to the genre(s) she was marketed principally within. Part of the value of examining this women's popular literature, submerged in literary history even if buoyantly afloat on the market in its own time, is the opportunity for a clearer evaluation of the function of gender in articulations of the "body" of culture in the context of an emerging "popular" fiction, as object of consumption, representation of identities (national, authorial, class, and otherwise) and "subject" of discourse – puns intended.

M. E. Braddon is the author most familiarly identified with sensation. Rhoda Broughton and Ouida, each writing very different kinds of novels, had first successes in this same period (i.e., the 1860s), and were lumped together with other novelists deemed "sensational" because of similarities which today would strike readers as quite superficial, but which then were seen as definitive shared traits: setting which was both domestic and local and/or a perceived emphasis on women as actively desiring, for example. After the sixties, Broughton and Ouida were perceived as working in two separate genres, still recognizable today: the romance (love story) and the society novel, also known as the novel of high life. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) is the novel conventionally credited with launching "sensation," and, although it is possible to debunk the perception of that novel as the "start" of the new genre, let alone its quintessence, the fact that it has been perceived that way has a certain significance.⁵

In fact, *Lady Audley's Secret* is primarily composed of three narratives: the moderately "sensational" narrative of Lady Audley's rise and fall; the traditional male coming-of-age story of Robert Audley's rise to adult status, and the detective plot which connects the two "main" narratives. By shifting the generic focus to read as primary the second of these narratives, we are able to trace an ironic revision of *The Odyssey*, and the suggestion that the coming to manhood of the male character is mediated and made possible by the often unremarked destruction of female power and subordination of women's sexuality to the homosocial (and homosexual) male bond. The first of the narratives is a "low-culture" genre, as is the third; the second is a "high-culture" genre. Sexuality, represented as a contagious disease, is the force that draws the narratives together and causes them to lose distinctness. The public's reading of *Lady Audley's Secret*, therefore, as a sensation novel works in exactly the same way as the multiple plot does – it provides a clear working example of how interests, issues, and themes gendered female are subordinated

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and sacrificed in order to maintain a classed and gendered hierarchy: Lucy's values are repudiated in order to allow Robert to adopt "appropriate" adult male values; the masculine-genre coming-of-age novel, with its implicit self-critique, is elided in favor of the less complicated reading of a feminine-genre low-culture sensation novel by a "hack" lady-novelist.

In *The Doctor's Wife*, an adaptation of *Madame Bovary* published only two years after *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon deliberately attempts to establish the novel, and herself as its author, in the high-culture genre of realism by positioning the novel, through internal textual cues, against sensation fiction.⁶ In typical Braddon fashion, however, the novel critiques the legitimacy of the very distinctions which Braddon is seemingly attempting to use. Although the authorial voice bluntly states "this is not a sensation novel," and a character in the novel, who is himself a sensation author, repeatedly defines sensation in order to contrast it with the "real life" of the characters in the novel, Braddon uses Isabel, her protagonist, to collapse the borders between low-culture novels (which Isabel reads), the "realism" in which Isabel lives, and the superior degree of reality in which the reader exists. As in *Lady Audley's Secret*, female sexuality is the magnetic force which causes worlds to collide and to blend, which blending is always damaging and draining, though strangely appealing. Isabel becomes a vampiric figure living in the borderlands between life and art, high and low culture, upper and lower class – a diseased space which is fatal to the men drawn into that space by their attraction to her, but in which space only, like Rappacini's daughter's, Isabel's existence is viable. Within that space, Isabel, defined as a "reader," meets up with the "real reader" of the novel; within that same space, the reader of the novel must reorganize her or his perceptions of reality and fiction just as Isabel is struggling to do. Because of her "readerliness," Isabel is both more naive and more sophisticated than the other characters in the text: naive, because she fails to read her reality by cues other than those of popular fiction; sophisticated, because she refuses to be read on those other terms, and ultimately is the only survivor of the multiple misreadings which surround her. *The Doctor's Wife*, as a popular novel, inverts and comments upon social "reality" as well as "realism," transforming both into texts to be read from within the text-world of popular fiction.

Rhoda Broughton, a writer who seemed comfortable with her career-long identification with the genre of romance, was also first identified as a sensation novelist in the 1860s, largely because the protagonists of

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Cometh Up As A Flower and *Not Wisely But Too Well*, her first bestsellers, described their passion in terms of its physical effects upon them – which evidently caused a corresponding shock to the decorous reader's nerves.⁷ In retrospect, it is difficult to see any similarity between these stories, generally dealing with conventional romance thwarted in merely conventional ways, and the hidden-body, switched-identity stories of sensational magazines. But Broughton's heroines were bold and bad (within limits), and that aligned them with "lovely furies" like Aurora Floyd. One of these bold, and almost-but-not-quite-too bad women is Kate Chester of *Not Wisely But Too Well*. Kate's exploration of her own sexuality and surrender to strong attraction has disastrous consequences, as her attraction to big, bold and really-bad Dare Stamer is foiled, unconsummated, by the traditional Victorian inconvenience of a previous wife still living. As Kate works to control or eliminate the passion within herself, she undertakes a series of activities, finally ending her days as a Sister of Mercy. Again, as in Braddon's *Doctor's Wife*, passion is represented as a disease, here literally as fever, which spreads throughout the community and to which Kate is drawn. Kate's status as ministering angel is complicated by the metaphor which links disease to the sexual passion figured as resident in her own body. Kate, as passionate female body, becomes a vector for disease, which is figured as foreign invasion, class blending, and the subversion of high-culture literature by popular forms, such as the romance novel itself. Her victories over her sexuality and closure of her own body by overcoming her sexual attraction are undermined by Broughton's presentation of her as a danger to the community in which she attempts to expiate her "sins" through service. The dualism that is present in Kate is disruptive; through it, Broughton suggests the presence of that dualism within all cultural forms – just as Sister Kate carries with her the seeds of passionate "fever," the religious tracts which Kate drops into the gutter when she is frightened by rude men making sexual comments carry their own critique – they are created in reaction to the "low" and therefore cannot exist without that context. Like Isabel, Kate is a liminal creature, an inhabitant of in-between spaces, who refuses to be contained, even within the fairly impassable boundaries of the novel-world itself. Through the agency of a narrator given privileged status of someone "more real" than the characters he describes, who refers to but does not explain "another story" that involves a relationship between himself and Kate, she escapes the containment of the "story" to inhabit, however partially, the privileged space which the reader shares with an