

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10116-6 - English Fiction and the Evolution of Language, 1850–1914

Will Abberley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ENGLISH FICTION AND THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE, 1850–1914

Victorian science changed language from a tool into a natural phenomenon, evolving independently of its speakers. Will Abberley explores how science and fiction interacted in imagining different stories of language evolution. Popular narratives of language progress clashed with others of decay and degeneration. Furthermore, the blurring of language evolution with biological evolution encouraged Victorians to reimagine language as a mixture of social convention and primordial instinct. Abberley argues that fiction by authors such as Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hardy and H. G. Wells not only reflected these intellectual currents, but also helped to shape them. Genres from utopia to historical romance supplied narrative models for generating thought experiments in the possible pasts and futures of language. Equally, fiction that explored the instinctive roots of language intervened in debates about language standardization and scientific objectivity. These textual readings offer new perspectives on twenty-first-century discussions about language evolution and the language of science.

WILL ABBERLEY is a research fellow for the Faculty of English Language and Literature, University of Oxford, exploring concepts of natural mimicry and deception in Victorian literature and the life sciences.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10116-6 - English Fiction and the Evolution of Language, 1850–1914

Will Abberley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

General editor

Gillian Beer, *University of Cambridge*

Editorial board

Isobel Armstrong, *Birkbeck, University of London*

Kate Flint, *University of Southern California*

Catherine Gallagher, *University of California, Berkeley*

D. A. Miller, *University of California, Berkeley*

J. Hillis Miller, *University of California, Irvine*

Daniel Pick, *Birkbeck, University of London*

Mary Poovey, *New York University*

Sally Shuttleworth, *University of Oxford*

Herbert Tucker, *University of Virginia*

Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10116-6 - English Fiction and the Evolution of Language, 1850–1914

Will Abberley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ENGLISH FICTION AND THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE, 1850–1914

WILL ABBERLEY



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10116-6 - English Fiction and the Evolution of Language, 1850–1914

Will Abberley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107101166

© Will Abberley 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Abberley, Will, 1984–

English fiction and the evolution of language, 1850–1914 / Will Abberley.

pages cm. – (Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-century Literature and Culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-10116-6 (Hardback)

1. English language–Social aspects–History–19th century. 2. English language–Social aspects–History–20th century. 3. English fiction–History–19th century.

4. English fiction–History–20th century. 5. Language and literature–

History–19th century. I. Title.

PE1085.A63 2015

823'.809–dc23 2014046689

ISBN 978-1-107-10116-6 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> vi
Introduction: language under a microscope	i
1 The future of language in prophetic fiction	22
2 Primitive language in imperial, prehistoric and scientific romances	56
3 Organic orality and the historical romance	91
4 Instinctive signs: nature and culture in dialogue	128
Conclusion: widening the lens	164
<i>Notes</i>	176
<i>Bibliography</i>	205
<i>Index</i>	226

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10116-6 - English Fiction and the Evolution of Language, 1850–1914

Will Abberley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Angelique Richardson of the University of Exeter for her endless, invaluable advice and encouragement during the development of this project. I am also grateful to Exeter's Regenia Gagnier, who challenged and made me refine my arguments. I am thankful to Philipp Erchinger for many interesting conversations that have pushed this study in new directions. Another person deserving of thanks is Sharon Ruston of Lancaster University, whose excellent series of AHRC-funded workshops entitled Theories and Methods: Literature, Science and Medicine inspired new avenues of thought during my research. I have benefited greatly from engaging with the British Association for Victorian Studies, Thomas Hardy Society, Thomas Hardy Association and British Society for Literature and Science, and I would like to thank the committees of these institutions for their work.

I am very grateful to Peter Faulkner for his untiring help with my research into William Morris. I have lost count of the number of stimulating chats we have had over tea, and of the books he has lent me. I thank Isobel Armstrong and James Moore for giving me their time and advice. I am also thankful to Ruth Livesey and her colleagues at the *Journal of Victorian Culture* for rigorous constructive criticism of my work on Morris. I owe a great deal to David Amigoni and Jason Hall for their incisive analyses of my research, which helped me to put this book on a firmer foundation. I am grateful to Virginia Richter for pointing me towards recent examples of paleoanthropological fiction. Further, I am grateful to the staff of the British Library, Bodleian and Beinecke libraries, and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at the University of Illinois for their assistance.

I must thank my brother Joe and his wife Karah for putting me up numerous times during research trips. I am eternally grateful to my mother, Tessa Abberley, who has always nurtured my interest in literature and helped me to believe in myself. I wish the same to my father, John

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10116-6 - English Fiction and the Evolution of Language, 1850–1914

Will Abberley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vii

Acknowledgements

Abberley, sadly no longer with us, whom I will always remember traipsing through the Staffordshire Moorlands loudly quoting Tennyson and Omar Khayyám to bemused ramblers. My final thanks go to Deni, for supporting me throughout this project, and teaching me to laugh and love in a foreign language.