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ANDREW MANGHAM

Introduction

What is sensation fiction? The truth is, it is difficult to say with any certainty. Literary scholars agree generally that, in or about November 1859, Victorian literature changed and that the definitive moment came when a ghostly woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, laid a cold, thin hand on the shoulder of a young man as he walked home late one evening. The incident takes place in the opening section of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60), a novel that had been commissioned by Charles Dickens to build on the success of his new magazine *All the Year Round*. Following the triumph of Collins's novel, other writers (most notably Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood) emulated *The Woman in White*'s style; critical responses to the resulting vogue of writing referred to the emerging genre as 'sensation fiction'. The more we look into this genre with an eye to noticing patterns and discernible boundaries, however, the more we notice those patterns and consistencies fade away. On a basic chronological level, it is difficult to know where sensation fiction begins and ends. Anne-Marie Beller's chapter in this Companion, 'Sensation Fiction in the 1850s', demonstrates how the style we have come to associate with the sensation school was being used much earlier than 1860. What is more, Lyn Pykett's closing chapter, 'The sensation legacy' shows, with a quotation from Phillip Waller, that 'the sensation novel did not so much die as "burst apart into subspecies"'. These subspecies included the detective novel, New Woman fiction and science fiction.

There is a risk, then, when we talk about sensation fiction, of overstating the suddenness with which it came and went. That the form's emergence was sudden and dramatic is something we see from the strongly flavoured reactions that Janice M. Allan discusses in chapter 7 of this book. Yet literary genres do not emerge in a vacuum. The novel's evolution has not been, in the words of G. K. Chesterton, a road on which 'man leav[es] his home behind him', but rather a building in which 'improvement means a man exalting the towers and extending the gardens of his home'.[1] The hieroglyphs of influence are inscribed indelibly into the foundations of every literary development, and

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such is true of the sensation novel. This Companion opens with two chapters that aim to chart two of the most important origins of the sensation style. Secondary criticism has shown how, in many ways, it was a hybrid of popular forms that had gone before it: melodrama and penny dreadful literature stand out as being two of the most obvious examples. In chapter 2 of this Companion, however, Anne-Marie Beller demonstrates how many of the themes and narrative idiosyncrasies of the genre were first explored in shorter sensational pieces written in the 1850s. 'While the 1860s was in many respects the decade of sensation', she writes, 'the genre's "infancy" is clearly perceptible in the 1850s, in terms of the work already being produced by many of the authors later connected to sensationalism; in the emergence of key tropes and techniques of sensation fiction; and also in broader social developments which frequently served as the raw material for the sensational plots and thematic concerns of the genre throughout the following decade.'

It has been acknowledged by a number of studies that the popularity of the gothic mode, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had a significant impact on the shape and texture of the sensation novel. In chapter 3 of this Companion, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas discusses how sensation fiction drew upon the gothic's representation of women as beleaguered and marginalised in order to thematise women's roles and power (or lack of it) in mid-century popular literature. Gothicism in the sensation novel, according to Talairach-Vielmas, became a powerful method of expressing radical yet deep-seated ambivalences towards traditional views of female sexuality and gendered bodies.

The sensation novel was a visual genre. In their chapter 'Illustrating the sensation novel', Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge highlight how the form took advantage of new printing technologies in order to present visual image and written word side by side. Their chapter illustrates how images added to the sensational effect of these stories, and contributed, also, to the profusion of detail that sensation fiction became (in)famous for. The image of the artist becomes, according to Leighton and Surridge, a particular feature of the sensation plot itself which adds an element of complex self-reflexivity to these works' trajectories.

Another aspect of the sensation novel's 'visual' life was its representation on the stage. As Andrew Maunder illustrates in chapter 5, many of the landmark sensation texts were adapted, often without authors' consent, for the popular stage. As with the figure of the artist, the character of the actor, and the stage more generally, became a staple part of the genre's development. Jennifer Carnell's biography of Braddon, *The Literary Lives of M. E. Braddon* (2000), does an excellent job of reconstructing the life that Braddon had as an actress prior to becoming an author. Wilkie Collins had a fancy for treading the boards

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too, and he first met Dickens during their participation in an amateur production of Bulwer's *Not So Bad as We Seem* (1851). Another sensation novelist, Florence Marryat, participated in theatre for much of her life – she became an opera singer and was well known for staging theatrical séances. Maunder discusses how sensation fiction, indeed, took on another life for the stage; theatre adaptations, plus the fact that the novelists themselves were able to straddle the boundary between literary and dramatic form, resulted in the story of the Victorian theatre becoming a crucial chapter in the biography of the sensation novel. There was, Maunder notes, some ambivalence and concern over the cheapening of literature and theatre – caused predominantly by the popularisation of both forms in sensation and melodrama – but 'stage adaptations did not damage novels', he adds, 'but transformed them, affecting the audience's interpretation of them – an experience which even we can appreciate. After all, who, nowadays, does not think of *Oliver Twist* without also recalling to mind *Oliver!*?'

There is something about the sensation novel's methodological scepticism (or, in plainer words, its unwillingness to leave anything undoubted and unquestioned) that led to a powerful ability to question fixed traditions and ideologies in complex and radical ways. Richard Nemesvari, in chapter 6 of this volume, discusses how the genre developed a sophisticated means of questioning that most explosive of topics: sexuality. The queering of characters such as Marian Halcombe (who has the spirit and resolve of a man, plus feelings for her half-sister Laura Fairlie that do not appear to be entirely Platonic) and Lady Audley (again, a character whose strength of personality surpasses that of any of the male characters, and whose sisterly relationship with Phoebe Marks develops into a bond that seems 'queer'), is a means of demonstrating how 'queerness' exposed tensions and injustices at the heart of Victorian idealism. Indeed, Janice M. Allan's chapter on 'The contemporary response to sensation fiction' is, in essence, about the 'queering' of sensation fiction. Concentrating on the critical reaction to the form, Allan demonstrates how the term 'sensation' has always been 'slippery, elusive, and able to resist classification' and how, moreover, it was created by critics as a means of getting to grips with something that was 'other' or that was impossible to compartmentalise in ways that were typically Victorian. This polyvalence is what makes the sensation novel such a significant and powerful form, according to Allan. The way in which it has outlived the boxes and compartments created for it by nineteenth-century commentators is testament to how it cannot be bound by conclusions, agreements and collusions.

Hence, what sensation fiction has to say about a range of important topics is worth paying attention to; unfettered by some rigid formative strictures, deliberately provocative and polemic, the sensation text says searching things

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about some rather tense issues. In this Companion, Mariaconcetta Costantini, Saverio Tomaiuolo and Tara MacDonald each show, respectively, how the sensation format's knack of questioning and probing beneath surfaces leads to important representations of class, race and gender. In chapter 8, Costantini focuses on the representations of class identity and how the sensation genre contributed to discussions of the 'rising professional'. This quintessentially Victorian figure was a man whose work ethic is shown, by its place in sensation novels, to pose new challenges for the emerging middle class while suggesting new reforms, roles and ideologies for established professions (such as law and medicine). Tomaiuolo's chapter illustrates how the Indian Mutiny of 1857–8 became an adaptable image of rebellion – an image, moreover, that allowed Braddon to articulate narratives of struggle and conflict within the British domestic setting. He notes how 'colonial questions' represent sensation's 'attempt to find a middle ground and an "in-between space" to articulate "hybrid" strategies of social renewal'. Quoting the post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha, he adds: 'these "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovate sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself'. It seems to me that, call it what we may – queer, other, liminal, uncanny – the sensation novel is obsessed with 'in-between' spaces that provide a no-holds-barred area for asking controversial questions. Tara MacDonald's contribution on 'Sensation fiction, gender and identity' highlights how the form's obsession with masquerade and questions of identity disrupts the narrative in a way that raises questions about what is considered to be 'normal', and how we recognise it. Pykett has noted that the sensation novel was seen, during the nineteenth century, as a female form. 'One of the genre's most distinctive features was the way in which it displayed women and made a spectacle of femininity.'[2] Yet, as MacDonald demonstrates in chapter 10, the form also made spectacles of masculinity and androgyny. Strong and 'masculine' women such as Marian Halcombe and Cornelia Carlyle (*East Lynne*) are matched in number by weak and 'feminine' men (Frederick Fairlie, Noel Vanstone (*No Name*), Paul Marchmont (*Marchmont's Legacy*) and characters whose gender is not entirely definitive. One of the most striking examples of the latter is Miserrimus Dexter in Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875), whose long hair, beautiful face and lack of anatomy below the waist, all point to a questioning of his gender role. 'The sensation novel's playful engagement with human complications and misconceptions', observes MacDonald, 'made it an ideal form in which to disrupt gender conventions and challenge stable notions of identity'.

Sensation fiction was uniquely modern and of its time. As a product of the age of newspapers and new print technologies, the genre was ideally suited to

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comment on contemporaneous developments by incorporating them into its novels. In the eleventh chapter of this book, Tatiana Kontou demonstrates how, in spite of a strict naturalism that seemingly precluded any representations of the supernatural, the sensation form drew upon the themes and images associated with spiritualism. In both sensation novels and spiritualist practice, she argues, staged and domestic performances blurred the boundaries of the 'natural' and the 'supernatural'. Lillian Nayder continues the theme in chapter 12 by beginning her discussion with *Frankenstein* (1818) – a book that was pivotal to a shift from supernaturalism to 'gothic science' in literature. She observes how science was an important component in sensation's search for a unique vocabulary of modernity. Science, she adds, became 'gendered' in the popular novel. Images and languages derived from physiology, chemistry and physics were employed by sensation novelists in a way that can be viewed as 'reactionary as it is radical'. Interdisciplinary appropriations highlight, for Nayder, the complexity of the sensation form and, importantly, there is nothing simple, univocal or 'even' about ideas that moved between science and literature.

Graham Law's chapter on 'Sensation fiction and the publishing industry' charts the rise of the sensation genre, both as an idea and as a symptom of Victorian modernity. He traces the literary use of the term 'sensation' to stage melodrama in America, yet also demonstrates how the specific mid-nineteenth-century rise of cheap periodicals, circulating libraries and railway bookstalls fuelled the rise of a class of literature that some critics dismissed as 'so many yards of printed stuff'. What Law highlights is the 'fast' nature of sensation novel consumption, a fact which led critics to censure the form as ephemeral, hastily produced and suited to a mass market which preferred literature to be sugary and strong rather than worthy intellectual roughage. Yet, because sensation fiction was serialised in magazines, and because it was printed alongside articles and reports of world events, it was uniquely placed to comment on contemporaneous developments and to incorporate news and buzzwords into its spicy narratives. Tomaiuolo has shown, for instance, how images and languages drawn from the Indian Mutiny infiltrated into the sensation narratives of Mary Braddon. Kontou demonstrates how images of spiritualist practice also shaped the look and texture of the sensation novel. In chapter 14, Pamela K. Gilbert looks into the ways that developments in medicine had a hand in shaping the sensation style. She focuses on the professionalisation of medicine, the rise of the nineteenth-century 'mad doctor' and the red stain of vivisection. All of these burning issues found a platform in the sensation novel, and the medical figure provided, according to Gilbert, the impetus to discuss larger issues relating to the role of 'humanness' in the Victorian period.

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Finally, this collection concludes with two chapters that focus on the legacies of the sensation novel. As I noted at the start of my introduction, Waller suggested, rather persuasively, that 'the sensation novel did not so much die as "burst apart into subspecies"'. In chapter 15, Greta Depledge follows the lead of Pykett's *The Improper Feminine* (1992) in suggesting that one the most important of those ramifications was the New Woman novel of the *fin de siècle*. I have suggested elsewhere that one aspect that *fin-de-siècle* literature inherited from sensation fiction was the obsession with dangerous female characters.[3] Depledge adds that in introducing what was often the dangerous woman's nemesis, the female sleuth, the sensation novel became crucial to the development of the New Woman genre. The latter, itself a significant foundation of the Modernist Age, is well known for its introduction of strong female characters, and for raising questions of gender equality, sexual freedom and rights for women. Female detectives, who had inhabited sensation narratives such as Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* (1863) and Collins's *The Law and the Lady*, looked 'to moderate a path through ideas of feminity, womanhood and gender constructions. They negotiate[d] a new role for themselves' and, in doing so, uttered a war cry that inspired the New Women of the late nineteenth century. In the last chapter, Lyn Pykett explores an idea that Allan raises in chapter 7: namely the durability of the sensation form – its ability to break out of its Victorian chrysalis and to take flight as other methods and styles. Arguing with the nineteenth-century idea that the genre was a 'short-lived . . . phenomenon', Pykett demonstrates how sensation developed into (or, at least, influenced the shape of) later genres such as *fin-de-siècle* horror, science fiction, film, television serials and, most recently, the neo-Victorianism of authors like Michael Faber and Sarah Waters. 'The numerous developments, adaptations, mediations and appropriations of sensation novels', she concludes, 'suggest not only the continuing appeal of sensation fiction, but also its adaptive capacity as it is reworked for the cultural imaginary and social and ethical concerns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries'. The sensation novel's narratorial style was a powerful and significant moment in the Victorian literary tradition; its capacity for asking important questions continues.

NOTES

1. G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), 12.
2. Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel: from The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), 6–7.
3. Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 209–11.

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ANNE-MARIE BELLER

Sensation fiction in the 1850s

> That bitter term of reproach, 'sensation', had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsieur Jourdain talked prose.[1]

The sensation novel is invariably associated with the 1860s and is frequently seen as commencing with the publication of the three genre-defining novels, *The Woman in White* (1859–60), *East Lynne* (1861) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Margaret Oliphant, in her review essay of 1862, credited Collins with 'originating a new school in fiction' and discussions of the 'new' vogue for sensation novels proliferated in periodicals as diverse as the *Christian Remembrancer* and the *The Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*.[2] Modern scholarship on sensation fiction, since its inception in the 1970s, has tended to reproduce this assumption regarding the newness of the form at the beginning of the sixties. Winifred Hughes, for example, in her important recovery of sensation fiction in 1980, suggested that the sub-genre 'had no perceptible infancy ... it sprang, full-blown, nearly simultaneously, from the minds of Wilkie Collins, Mrs Henry Wood, and M. E. Braddon'.[3] Although this 'genesis myth' has not gone unchallenged in the significant body of scholarship on the sensation novel produced over the last thirty years, the idea of the early 1860s as a point of origin has continued to hold currency, despite the fact that it is an unsatisfactory account on a number of levels.

While several critics have acknowledged that in many ways sensation fiction was not precisely new at the beginning of the 1860s, and have pointed variously to influences which include sensational penny fiction, Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Eugene Aram* (1832), the fiction of the Brontës, Newgate novels of the thirties and forties and earlier gothic fiction, there has been no sustained examination of the roots of sensationalism in the decade immediately preceding the widespread cultural discussion of the phenomenon. Andrew Maunder's six-volume collection of lesser-known sensation novels, which includes a bibliography of fiction from 1855 onwards, has made a significant contribution towards encouraging us to think beyond the usual parameters and, as he writes in the introduction to the series, '[i]t is slightly questionable whether 1860s Victorian readers and critics were struck by the

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newness of these novels as forcefully as recent critics like to think'.[4] In this chapter, I aim to further the idea that it was not so much the case that 'the sensation novel *exploded* onto the literary scene at the start of the 1860s',[5] but that it was more a dawning recognition on the part of critical commentators and the middle-class press that this type of fiction had gradually been gaining momentum for several years and was now popular to a worrying degree. While the 1860s was in many respects the decade of sensation, the genre's 'infancy' is clearly perceptible in the 1850s, in terms of the work already being produced by many of the authors later connected to sensationalism; in the emergence of key tropes and techniques of sensation fiction; and also in broader social developments which frequently served as the raw material for the sensational plots and thematic concerns of the genre throughout the following decade.

Scholars such as Andrew King and Graham Law have meticulously demonstrated how sensationalism permeated popular print culture throughout the earlier decades of the Victorian period, in penny fiction and in the proliferation of new periodicals catering to the working classes.[6] Indeed, many detractors of the sensation novel in the early 1860s explicitly identified these 'low' productions as the source of the 'contagion' infecting the three-decker and thereby 'making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room'.[7] There have, however, been relatively few studies of those middle-brow novels published during the 1850s which might be seen as recognisable precursors of the sensation novel as it was defined in the early 1860s in the prominent reviews by Margaret Oliphant, Henry Mansel and W. Fraser Rae. My aim here, then, is to trace the emergence of the sub-genre in the middle-class fiction market of the 1850s, with a view to re-emphasising how far the public perception of a newly created 'sensation genre' at the beginning of the following decade was dependent on, and shaped by, the review press.

The 1850s began with the publication of novels, on both sides of the Atlantic, which arguably contained clear sensational elements: in England Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and, in America, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Neither, of course, was a sensation novel in the purest sense (although precise definition remains a moot point), yet their deployment of several of the tropes which came to characterise sensation fiction in the 1860s belies the idea that literary sensationalism erupted out of nowhere with the publication of *The Woman in White*. In their blending of realism and melodrama, their interest in sexually transgressive women, the inclusion of seduction, adultery and dramatic 'sensation scenes', these works anticipated the dominant mode of popular fiction for the next couple of decades.

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Dickens, of course, was a key figure in the development of literary sensationalism, both as an important influence on the main practitioners and also as an author who provided a blueprint for sensationalising everyday life and domestic relations. Dickens's often-quoted statement in the preface to *Bleak House* (1852–3) that he had 'purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things' could be applied with equal validity to any later sensation novel and might indeed be taken almost as a *modus operandi* for the later sub-genre.[8] For some critics in the early years of the debates of the 1860s he was the leader of the 'sensation school'. One of the earliest uses of the term appeared in a *Sixpenny Journal* review essay, which included *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1860–1) as examples of 'sensation novels', while Margaret Oliphant also included Dickens in her 1862 survey of the trend, comparing *Great Expectations* unfavourably with *The Woman in White*.[9] However, as the critical campaign hardened, Dickens became conspicuously absent from the attacks levelled at sensation fiction, causing George Augustus Sala to comment in 1868: '[t]he only wonder is that the charitable souls [critics] have failed to discover that among modern "sensational" writers Mr Charles Dickens is perhaps the most thoroughly, and has been from the very outset of his career the most persistently, "sensational" writer of the age'.[10] The early critics had indeed noticed but, as the sensation phenomenon grew, the attacks focused increasingly on less established writers than Dickens and, significantly, on women writers predominantly.

Unease about the increasing tendency towards sensationalism in literature was being voiced throughout the 1850s, contrary to the tendency to locate these anxieties exclusively in the following decade. Richard D. Altick notes that '[t]he rate at which sensational fiction was selling around 1850 gave deep concern to all public-spirited citizens'.[11] Altick, of course, is referring to such productions as the penny bloods aimed at the lower classes, but elsewhere there is evidence of more general concern for the status of literature at all levels. In an 1856 essay, Walter Bagehot noted the propensity for sensationalism and predicted its increasing exploitation in mainstream fiction: 'Exaggerated emotions, violent incidents, monstrous characters crowd our canvas; they are the resource of a weakness which would obtain the fame of strength. Reading is about to become a series of collisions against aggravated breakers, of beatings with imaginary surf.'[12] Bagehot's prescient complaints closely anticipate those of Mansel, Rae and Oliphant a decade later, and they are echoed in other contemporaneous essays in relation to 1850s fiction.

In one lengthy review essay entitled 'Literature of 1856', the anonymous critic comes to the exasperated conclusion that the novels of the year are 'for the most part, utter and unmitigated rubbish'.[13] Like Bagehot, who pinpoints exaggeration, violence of plot and 'monstrous' characterisation as the chief

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elements affecting the deterioration of fiction, the writer here also appears to diagnose the problem as a failure of realism, or at least the verisimilitude commonly evoked by Victorian reviewers as the measure of success: 'Where these writers pick up their ideas about nature and life we know not; but this we know, that the personages who live and move and have their being in these books are not to be met with anywhere but in these books. They are not flesh and blood . . . there is no truth in them.'[14] These comments closely prefigure criticisms levelled at sensation novelists in the following decade, such as Rae's attack on Braddon's characterisation skills, which he claims demonstrate her 'entire ignorance of human nature and mental processes'.[15] Reviewers during the 1850s also anticipated the later opponents of sensation fiction in their implicit hostility to the increased presence and commercial success of female novelists: 'And who are the writers of fiction? For the most part ladies, who think that a ream of paper, a bottle of ink, and a bundle of crow-quills are all that is necessary to write a book with.'[16] Despite these misgivings about trends in fiction writing during the 1850s, many of the novels which notably pre-empt the sensation fiction of the following decades did receive favourable reviews. Before considering some of the lesser-known novels that deserve to be reinserted in to the literary-historical account of sensation fiction, it is important first to acknowledge the early work of one of the central figures of Victorian sensation and his role in the development of, arguably, the most popular fictional mode of the mid-century.

Basil (1852) and the sensation of modern life

It is interesting that Braddon's narrator, in the excerpt from *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) heading this chapter, alludes specifically to the 'fifty-second year of this present century' because it was in 1852 that Wilkie Collins published *Basil*, a work which employs many of the key themes and characteristics that would later come to define the sensation novel. It was Collins's first novel to place a sensational tale of crime, treachery and emotional turmoil into a contemporary middle-class setting, leading more than one modern critic to posit *Basil* as a credible prototype for sensation fiction or even as the first true sensation novel.

Basil constitutes a distinct departure from Collins's first published novel, the historical romance *Antonina, or the Fall of Rome* (1850), and its subtitle 'A Story of Modern Life' anticipates later sensation fiction's focus on modernity and its domestication of the gothic. At its most fundamental level, *Basil* is a novel about identity and class, and it also offers a remarkably frank examination of mid-Victorian sexual mores. *Basil* relates 'the history of little more than the events of one year' in the life of a well-born and affluent young

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