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# VICTORIAN WOMEN AND WAYWARD READING

In the nineteenth century, no assumption about female reading generated more ambivalence than the supposedly feminine facility for identifying with fictional characters. The belief that women were more impressionable than men inspired a continuous stream of anxious rhetoric about "female quixotes": women who would imitate inappropriate characters or apply incongruous frames of reference from literature to their own lives. While the overt cultural discourse portrayed female literary identification as passive and delusional, Palacios Knox reveals increasing accounts of Victorian women wielding literary identification as a deliberate strategy. Wayward women readers challenged dominant assumptions about "feminine reading" and, by extension, femininity itself. *Victorian Women and Wayward Reading* contextualizes crises about female identification as reactions to decisive changes in the legal, political, educational, and professional status of women over the course of the nineteenth century: changes that wayward reading helped women first to imagine and then to enact.

MARISA PALACIOS KNOX is Assistant Professor of Literatures and Cultural Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, where she is also affiliate faculty with the Gender and Women's Studies Program. She has published articles in *Victorian Poetry, Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and *Literature Compass*.

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# VICTORIAN WOMEN AND WAYWARD READING

*Crises of Identification*

MARISA PALACIOS KNOX

*University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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In loving memory of my mother and perpetual inspiration,
Valentina Palacios Knox

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Frontmatter
More Information

# *Contents*

*List of Figures* *page* viii
*Acknowledgments* ix

Introduction 1

1 Masculine Identification and Marital Dissolution 23

2 Novels without Heroines: Sensation and Elective Identification 49

3 Character Invasion and the Victorian Actress 77

4 Antipathetic Telepathy: Female Mediums and Reading the Enemy 97

5 "The Valley of the Shadow of Books": The Morbidity of Female Detachment 119

6 The New Crisis: Can We Teach Identification? 146

*Notes* 166
*Works Cited* 191
*Index* 225



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Marisa Palacios Knox
Frontmatter
More Information

# *Figures*

1 Thackeray's illustration of Jones. From William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1848). Courtesy of Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. *page* 2
2 "Donna Quixote." From *Punch* (1894). © Punch Cartoon Library/Topfoto. 16
3 Trilby conducted by Svengali. From George du Maurier, *Trilby* (1894). Photo by Universal Images Group, courtesy of Getty Images Ltd. 101
4 "A New Musical Instrument." From *Punch* (1843). © Punch Cartoon Library/Topfoto. 102



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