VICTORIAN CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS
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PROBLEM NOVELS

Victorian Fiction Theorizes the Sensational Self

ANNA MARIA JONES
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If [after reading sensation novels] the reader is not prepared to be poisoned, stabbed, blown into the air; to find a skeleton in every cupboard, and a lost will in every drawer; to meet with an inconvenient number of husbands, and a most perplexing superfluity of wives; and to get rid of them by means of arson, strangulation, or a deep well, he must be very insensible indeed to the influence and charm of the situation.

Having prepared us by these well-known arts not to be surprised at anything, our sensational novelists then introduce us to domestic relations of an exceedingly peculiar character. The means are various, though only slightly various, but the end invariably one—to make the reader very tolerant of whatever strange thing may happen beneath the roof of the home to whose secrets he is introduced.

—Alfred Austin, “Our Novels: The Sensational School” (1870)

The reigning contextual mode of critical study of the Victorian period ... relies on the fluid translation of a (social, economic, intellectual) environment into fictional discourse: typically, a more-or-less out of the way historical feature of the period is characterized through the selective use of primary and secondary materials, and its pertinence to the proper assessment of (usually canonical) texts asserted. To be sure, there may be side skirmishes with Michel Foucault or Nancy Armstrong in the introduction, but such theoretical anxieties pass, and the critic settles down to read a few canonical and perhaps a smaller number of uncanonical Victorian novels with a mind stocked more-or-less full of writing on, say, sanitation, correcting a few previous readings as he or she goes ... That the limits of this mode of criticism, as commonly practiced, are familiar and much discussed makes their persistence all the more intriguing.

In his 2003 review essay, Andrew Miller registers dissatisfaction with the year’s research in the nineteenth century, which showed a preponderance of Foucault-inspired studies “confidently immured within an orthodox, loosely new-historical set of historiographical assumptions, devoted to understanding and judging individual texts by appeal to historical contexts sometimes richly—but often poorly—conceived” (960). Of this “reigning mode” he goes on to say, perhaps with more accuracy than charity: “At their least successful, such books display a kind of strangled ambition, narrowing their contextual field but making hyperbolic claims within that field” (967).

Nor, as Miller points out, is he the only critic to notice the limitations of this critical mode—they are “familiar and much discussed” (967). Indeed, James Eli Adams notes in his 2001 “Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century” essay: “Many recent accounts of Victorian domesticity have restaged versions of what one might call Foucauldian melodrama: the familiar story of the many-headed Hydra of ‘surveillance’ violating the sanctity of domestic privacy” (858–59). Similarly, Caroline Levine writes in The Serious Pleasures of Suspense (2003): “In the wake of Barthes, Belsey and [D. A.] Miller, it has become something of a commonplace to presume that suspense fiction reinforces stability, activating anxiety about the social world only in order to repress that anxiety in favor of unambiguous disclosures and soothing restorations” (2). And Caroline Reitz, whose own Detecting the Nation (2004) undertakes “to challenge the us-them model of panopticism” (xv), comments in a 2004 book review:

Simon Joyce’s Capital Offenses is one of a recent crop of very welcome books that takes another look at the question of crime and punishment in Victorian culture, a question that since the late 1980s has come to be dominated by Foucauldian readings of power … Joyce’s book joins works … which ask the reader to challenge the ‘containment thesis’ of a certain kind of Foucauldian reading of culture and to explore more complicated, less ‘unidirectional’ ideas about power. (100)

Reitz goes on to compare Simon Joyce’s work to Lauren Goodlad’s 2003 Victorian Literature and the Victorian State, which has received similar press. For example, Jennifer Ruth, citing Andrew Miller’s barbed remarks on post-Foucauldian Victorian studies, writes: “For many of its readers, the value of Lauren Goodlad’s new book … will
be determined by its success in offering a paradigm that can move us, as the title of its first chapter puts it, ‘Beyond the Panopticon’” (“Review” 121). Editors Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente describe their 2002 collection, *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle*, in similar language: “In key respects, the present volume looks to a post-Foucauldian dispensation, keeping its distance from approaches that too easily assimilate bodies of knowledge to techniques of management—whether of the social body, the intellectual field, or the individual person” (8).

According to this critical turn, the problem seems to be that Foucault-inspired studies, in the wake of foundational works like Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988), and Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* (1988), are guilty of erasing difference, reading all texts and contexts into a giant uniform power/knowledge edifice. In other words, the tools with which the master narratives of Enlightenment rationality and psychological “repression” were dismantled have instated a new master narrative—one in which surveillance, discursive knowledge, and discipline invariably produce “docile bodies.” If only we could “get past” Foucault—one pictures him occupying (or not?) that room in the tower of the Panopticon—we could reinvigorate a stagnant field of study. What is being offered in place of the “comfortable pessimism” (Anderson and Valente 9) of the containment thesis is the exhilaration of messiness, the promise of more than meets the eye, and more or less explicitly the promise of the return of liberal agency. As Jonah Siegel writes in a 2005 review of David Wayne Thomas’s *Cultivating the Victorians* (2004), Thomas “attempts to engage the frequently unspoken, but nevertheless influential notion that the cultivation of the individual is best understood as a mystified subjugation of the self quite contrary to the aspiration for individual agency with which it is often associated” (309).

But, I want to suggest, it is not that “we just can’t get past Foucault.” (Indeed, by giving Foucault credit for the nuances that literary criticism often erases from his theory, we can see that much of what he says about productive as opposed to repressive power still seems useful.) Rather, this Foucauldian paradigm invites scholars to reiterate over and over again, if not the same arguments then the same generic tropes—tropes that depend paradoxically on mutually exclusive notions of cultural power and critical agency. The notion that nothing is outside of discourse, that power invisibly and inexorably penetrates all aspects of modern life, has been explored and
elaborated by a generation of scholars whose invocation of Foucault seems to grant them a “get out of discourse free” card. In other words, studies that describe the intricate workings of power and cultural production on unconscious subjects in Victorian culture do so from a privileged position of critical empowerment and distance that the theoretical underpinnings of the projects would deny.

This critical paradigm operates not just on a hermeneutics of suspicion but, I would argue, on a “hermeneutics of sensation”—a mode of inquiry that depends on (1) the critic’s suspicion of a “secret” power at work invisibly in some historical context; (2) the ferreting-out of that secret through the critic’s detective work, sifting for textual clues; and (3) the revelation of the secret to a readership attuned to the sensational nuances of the genre. Therefore, the similarities between the two passages I quoted as epigraphs to this chapter—Alfred Austin’s satirical description of the sensation novel, any sensation novel, in Temple Bar, and Andrew Miller’s description of a kind of Victorian scholarship “function machine” (context X + novel Y = critical monograph Z)—arise out of more than an incidental confluence. In describing recent work in nineteenth-century studies, Miller is picking up on the dangers of the sensation genre: in seeking to produce sensations in an increasingly jaded reading public, authors resort to means “various, though only slightly various,” (Austin 414) to imagine permutations within the prescriptions of the genre.

I trace the generic tropes of current Victorian scholarship back to Victorian literary sensationalism for two reasons: First, like the sensation novel, Victorian cultural studies seeks to expose the hidden significance of the ordinary—to reveal, in Austin’s words, “domestic relations of an exceedingly peculiar character.” Second, both sensation novels and Victorian cultural studies—Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian alike—grapple with similarly complex and layered theories of subjectivity. Indeed, as I hope to show, some of the difficulties currently at play in literary scholarship “after Foucault”—in particular the problem of accounting for a subject other than as entirely culturally subjugated without merely returning to optimistic faith in the rational autonomous individual—are explored in the very fiction that was so useful for inaugurating the age of Foucault in the first place.

Like its Gothic predecessors, the sensation novel appeals affectively to its readers, offering opportunities for intense attachments and emotional and visceral responses. As Austin sarcastically points out, the sensation novel demands that its reader be “sensible” to its
influences. But, unlike the Gothic, the sensation novel’s “charm” resides in its exposure of the lurid secrets hidden in the mundane. In 1982 when Patrick Brantlinger wrote “What Is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?” he articulated the parameters of the genre thus:

The sensation novel was and is sensational partly because of content: it deals with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings … The best sensation novels are also, as Kathleen Tillotson points out, “novels with a secret,” or sometimes several secrets, in which new narrative strategies were developed to tantalise the reader by withholding information rather than divulging it. (30)

John Sutherland similarly identifies two features that characterized the advent of sensation fiction with the 1859 serialization of *The Woman in White*: the “detective feats” of its protagonists and its “high-impact narrative” (“Wilkie Collins” 75). To this I would add that sensation fiction also engages the reader in a fantasy of knowingness in which suspense and uncertainty anticipate the pleasures of revelation and explanation—murdiness precedes clarity; messiness invites resolution. Moreover, the reader’s pleasure in the “novel with a secret” (like *Lady Audley’s Secret* or *The Moonstone*, say) inheres in the paradoxical pleasure of being simultaneously “in” the mystery, invited to follow along and glean clues alongside the text’s detectives, and outside the text, knowing more than a character “embedded” in the narrative.

The discovery of Foucauldian criticism was the bad news that the reader’s comfortable yet exciting position of knowingness outside the text is really one embedded in a disciplinary network of which the text itself is a productive part. But this discovery has occasioned a whole new narrative with a secret, a story that critics of Victorian texts and readers offer to *their* readers—a new fantasy of knowingness, a new pleasure in suspense and revelation. Underpinning these new detective stories is the conviction that we are right to be suspicious, that power—coercive or productive—is ethically suspect and that “resistance” is to be fostered. It is not entirely my intention to argue otherwise, although recently critics like James Kincaid and Rey Chow have done so persuasively. But what I do want to suggest is that disciplinary power as a concept has become the means of imagining a cultural space exempt from disciplinary power as a mechanism. Of course, anyone who works at a university or other institution
will not, I imagine, try to argue that she or he operates in a “discipline-free zone,” nor even that her research and publishing are pure intellectual endeavor. But within the rhetorical and epistemological (which is to say, metaphorical) space of academic research, the critic emerges as a figure fantastically imbued with agency. In other words, in the “persistent” iterations of the story of disciplinary power in Victorian culture, critics are also telling the story of their own critical detachment and radical social potential.

Readers will no doubt begin to suspect that I am guilty of engaging in a detective story similar to the ones I reveal in other critics’ work. I certainly don’t want to disavow my own attachments to sensationalism, but rather to offer a kind of self-reflexive criticism that enjoys its guilt, as it were. Garrett Stewart argues in *Dear Reader*: “The novel always reads rather than merely transmits the prevailing discourses of its day” (276). Following this assertion, I take as a premise that, far from “the mid-Victorian novel flourish[ing] in innocence of theory” (Kendrick 1), novels both articulate and critique theories of culturally embedded subjectivity—in other words, they read themselves being read. And I want to present here literary criticism that reads itself reading the Victorians. It is thus my aim in *Problem Novels* to explore the idea that our critical projects have more in common with the “disciplined” (Victorian) reader of Victorian novels than we generally admit. I maintain that the Victorians were not so sensationally susceptible to discipline as they are often represented as being; nor are we so discipline-resistant as we might hope to be.

I consider works by Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope, and George Meredith, written within roughly a twenty-five-year span in the 1860s and 1880s. Although only Collins can be said to be a sensation novelist proper, all three novelists engaged very directly with the concept of sensationalism as a mode of appeal to their readership. In each case I argue that while the author posits a reader who is both culturally embedded and sensationally susceptible, he also explores a methodology for critical engagement with cultural texts, thereby simultaneously theorizing a critically empowered subject. Hence, the title *Problem Novels* indicates my sense that these novels pose problems for their readers by inviting them to consider the process of their own subject formation. And, in turn, I consider how these moments of fictional self-consciousness might offer ways of imagining our own critical endeavors as both affectively invested and critically engaged. Before discussing the novels, however, it will be useful to consider the genre of sensational criticism, after which I will
turn to some recent efforts to think past the “disciplinary model” of subject formation and discuss how these might be useful for reading problem novels (and Problem Novels).

OUR CRITICS: THE SENSATIONAL SCHOOL

As a storyteller [the detective] defines his superiority, conquering the ostensible criminal by absorbing him and his deviant plot within his own controlling story, defeating his rivals by presenting a convincing narrative of explanation, and even, at times, disempowering his fellow characters and figurative readers by subjecting them to artfully contrived moments of shock and sensational revelation.


If the Victorian sensation novel is about the revelation of shocking secrets, the pursuit of guilty parties, and detection of hidden crimes, then the project of much Victorian cultural studies scholarship likewise has been concerned with outing “invisible” power relationships, finding disciplinary stratagems where there seem to have been only popular novels, or ladies’ magazines, or India shawls. Certainly this shape is very clear in work from the 1980s and ’90s by Foucauldian scholars like D. A. Miller, Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, Ann Cvetkovich, and others, who addressed themselves to exploring the ramifications of productive power. As Miller writes, for example, in The Novel and the Police: “The turn in The Moonstone from a professional detective to lay detection acquires its widest resonance as a parable of the modern policing power that comes to rely less on spectacular displays of repressive force than on intangible networks of productive discipline” (51). Similarly, in Mixed Feelings (1992), Cvetkovich argues:

The image of the beautiful and transgressive [Lady Audley] becomes sensational when we know that she is evil and we both see and don’t see her criminality in her appearance … The meaning of the sensation or affect is thus constructed rather than natural, and the representation that produces it can signify both female transgression and its containment. (50)

In other words, Miller and Cvetkovich both argue that the exploration of crime within the novel stages the disciplining of subjects within Victorian culture. Robert Audley in Lady Audley’s Secret, for
instance, investigates the secret past of his uncle’s charming new wife and reveals, through the accrual of damning evidence, her lurid crimes and insanity, which, having been sensationally revealed, are then contained, literally in an asylum and figuratively within the resolution of the novel itself.

But here Miller and Cvetkovich write themselves into the role of the detective who has discovered a crime, in this case the invisible disciplinary power of the sensation novel itself. They too will track the novels’ secrets, revealing them to their readers clue by significant clue, offering a sensational payoff for those who follow their narratives to conclusion. In these narratives the threat of “productive discipline,” having been rendered tangible, will be neutralized. I want to be careful here not to imply that these studies or ones that follow them are necessarily wrong. I think that they offer valuable insights into Victorian texts and contexts. However, in mirroring the very narrative structures that they seek to reveal, they too participate in a kind of invisible disciplining, in this case of Victorian studies. And it is perhaps this “disciplining of the discipline” that accounts for the “persistence” that Andrew Miller notes; the discourse of Victorian studies does indeed, as discourses do, produce subjects in a particular mode.

As Miller observes, the sense in current criticism that it is time to move beyond the revelations of works like The Novel and the Police doesn’t necessarily lead to a different kind of criticism. I want to examine briefly two recent studies that I would call sensational criticism—Caroline Reitz’s Detecting the Nation (2004) and Simon Joyce’s Capital Offenses (2003)—and one study that gets accused of sensationalism, but for slightly different reasons, Caroline Levine’s The Serious Pleasures of Suspense (2003). Although the first two studies offer noteworthy complications of Foucauldian surveillance and engage very directly with the difficulties of doing Victorian studies post-Foucault, they nonetheless reproduce a kind of surveillance narrative within the structure of their arguments.

Both Reitz’s and Joyce’s studies are concerned with rereading the figure of the detective outside the model of panoptical power. For example, Reitz, who begins her study of Victorian detective fiction with a critique of Foucault’s Panopticon, writes:

In short, contrary to the logic of the Panopticon, the power of surveillance supplies a vital link between center and periphery as much as it reifies a difference between them. By tracking the power of
surveillance as it emerges in the form of the detective, I intend to challenge the “us-them” model of panopticism presently associated with imperial authority, Victorian national identity, and the figure of the detective. (xxiv–xxv)

Reitz’s study complicates what she sees as the uniformity of Foucauldian accounts of surveillance, but the very language of her critical project inadvertently creates an “us-them” dichotomy between the Victorians, whose uses of the detective figure are available for observation and analysis, and herself, the critical scholar who “tracks” the power of surveillance in Victorian culture. Reitz, in taking “a closer look at panopticism” to remedy the “too-tidy explanation of the rise of the detective” in post–The Novel and the Police scholarship (xx, xxii), performs a well-known trope of the detective novel, whereby the seemingly watertight explanation of the crime (often provided by the bumbling police or an enthusiastic sidekick) is revealed to be a red herring (by the more-clever detective), and the mystery must be addressed anew.

Joyce, whose work, you will recall, Reitz hails as a welcome corrective to Foucauldian scholarship, undertakes a similarly discursive reading of Victorian texts. He describes the objects of his study as follows:

London, then, is mapped: in a literal way by surveyors, architects, builders, cartographers; and in more figurative ways by novelists, journalists, sociologists, government investigators. I am primarily concerned here with that latter group of texts, as cultural artifacts that are both distinct from and also an extension of the former. (4)

For Joyce, “mapping” is the thing he is studying, but it also becomes the mode of his own analysis, which gathers together cultural artifacts in order to “draw distinctions,” to incorporate a “model of reception … [that] directs us back to practices of reading and the social formation and spaces within which it occurs.” Although Joyce’s study is ostensibly opposed to “geography as simply the holding in place of the reading subject, as it might be for a Foucauldian criticism,” he nevertheless uses Foucault (and Miller as his proxy) as the fixed points around and against which to draw his “reading formations” (5, 6; emphases mine). Further, if Joyce attributes to urban Victorians the “desire for mapping,” which, he argues, “would seem natural, given this terrifying displacement of self” and would “allow the
larger totality to appear knowable” (3), then surely his own project signifies a similar desire to chart hitherto unrevealed terrain in Victorian crime fiction for his readers. Indeed, in the final lines of Capital Offenses Joyce reminds his readers that he has “traced ... important shifts in the cultural representations of crime within a dramatically reconfigured political landscape” (233).

The metaphorical language of “tracking” and “mapping” to describe the critical project is by no means unique to Reitz and Joyce. Rather, it is ubiquitous in scholarly writing and signals what I would call “disavowed panoptic privilege.” Interestingly, both Reitz and Joyce make a double move: on the one hand, they imply that previous critics have fallen into a sensation trap by offering their readers lurid stories of hidden disciplinary power; on the other hand, they insist on the messiness and “murkiness” of Victorian culture. In other words, by setting their own work apart from previous accounts, which they allege have been too formulaic in their attachments to the “containment thesis,” these critics present a picture of Victorian culture newly reinvested with deviance, complexity, and mystery, and therefore inviting new investigation.

In this way, sensational scholarship posits a triple-layered readership: the susceptible, malleable Victorian reader who was “produced” through the discourses of his or her age; the sensational (and therefore imperfectly critical) Victorianist reader who apprehended some but not all of the mystery from the available clues; and the critically savvy “realist” reader of today who, with the benefit of hindsight, can see what was hidden from the Victorians themselves and from past generations of Victorianists. Thus, for example, Lauren Goodlad claims in Victorian Literature and the Victorian State to offer her readers the anachronistically privileged perspective to “view the New Poor Law from within the culture that produced it” (35). One can certainly see how this pattern replicates itself with each new study staking a claim based in some part on the insufficiency of previous work and thereby contracting with readers to provide ever newer and bigger revelations. But, in making this kind of gesture toward “truth,” critics belie their sensationalism, or rather, paradoxically, they exhibit “detective feats” and offer “high-impact narrative[s]” based on a newer, more-comprehensive, and more-accurate experience of Victorian literature and culture. As James Eli Adams maintains, the new Victorian studies “offer a more complex, more plausible, and ultimately far more engrossing account” than the familiar “Foucauldian melodrama” (859).
What is interesting about this commitment to faithful representation is that it adopts the same language that the Victorians themselves used to privilege realism over sensationalism. Compare, for example, an 1872 review of Anthony Trollope—in which the reviewer claims that the public, “who eagerly swallowed the sensation poison for a time … [now] knows where to turn for the faithful portraiture of the present which alone it loves to study” (Hoey 400)—with Jonah Siegel’s review of David Wayne Thomas’s *Cultivating Victorians*, which, Siegel claims, “may be recommended as a soft-spoken yet effective corrective to influential ideas of liberal values that have been more often assumed than clearly established” (309). According to Siegel, Thomas’s “gentility of expression” and “commendable tact” are coupled with “extremely responsible and archivally informed case studies of Victorian culture” (310). By adopting this “realist vs. sensational” rhetoric, critics answer the crisis of faith that Andrew Miller articulates when he questions the “intriguing persistence” of Foucault. The answer is this: having learned to see through the sensational appeal of panoptical power, the critical world now knows where to turn for the “faithful portraiture” of realist criticism.

This privileging of realism is illustrated in Peter Garrett’s 2005 review of Caroline Levine’s *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*. If, for Siegel, David Wayne Thomas is the Trollope of Victorian studies, then Levine is Garrett’s Mary Braddon. Garrett makes the now-familiar gesture “beyond” Foucault. He begins by remarking that recent works in Victorian studies have “loosened the hold of notions like Barthes’s ‘classic realist text’ or Foucault’s panoptic discipline, enabling us to set aside condescending or suspicious assumptions that nineteenth-century realism was hopelessly naïve or enthralled to bourgeois ideology” (490). He argues, however, that while Levine “presents her study as a contribution to this reappraisal,” her “curious” version of realism ultimately undermines the validity of her argument. Garrett concludes, “If Levine had recognized the implausible results of her own critical experiment, and abandoned the effort to link realism with suspense, there would still remain much of interest … But as an account of the relation between ‘Victorian realism and narrative doubt,’ her book is as implausible as the most sensational fiction” (490–91).

Garrett’s invocation of sensation fiction as an uncomplimentary comparison designates Levine’s book as sensational because it reveals realism’s “secret” attachment to suspense, a secret that he finds far-fetched. Garrett points to the implausibility of sensation
criticism much in the way that Wilkie Collins, perhaps disingenuously, rebuked sensation novelists for the “publication of books that pander to morbid delight in scenes of crime and guilt, which seem to have a special attraction to uneducated and debased minds” and which are “written to gratify a craving after excitement” (“Art of Novel Writing” 392). According to Collins, and Garrett seemingly, the sensational author resorts to far-fetched plot devices in order to pander to his or her audience. Although one would hesitate to suggest that Garrett accuses fellow scholars of possessing “uneducated and debased minds,” I don’t think we should overlook the sensational appeal of precisely the implausibility that he rebukes, even in the most “responsible and archivally informed” of scholarship.

Indeed, the merits of Levine’s book or the accuracy of Garrett’s description of it aside, the review itself would seem to occasion at least two widely divergent responses from readers unfamiliar with Levine’s work. On the one hand, one might say, “Thank goodness I have been warned away from the implausibilities that this study would inflict on me,” and look for a less sensational study of realism. But on the other hand, one might say, “Implausible as the most sensational fiction? You say that like it’s a bad thing!” and run over to the campus library first thing to investigate. I would suggest that despite current disavowals of sensationalism, the “implausible” argument is precisely what is prized in Victorian studies, and with good reason. After all, as every reader of sensation novels knows, the most obvious explanation is never the right answer. The pleasure of uncovering the hidden significance of a seemingly inconsequential clue is much the same, I would argue, whether one is reading about Walter Hartright discovering the importance of a railway timetable to Laura Fairlie’s “death,” or about Nancy Armstrong unearthing the pivotal role of conduct literature in the formation of bourgeois ideology, or about Caroline Reitz revealing the English detective at the outskirts of the Empire.

In fact, what I find most interesting about Levine’s work is that in linking the unlikely suspects of serious intellectual skepticism and narrative suspense, she shows how cultural studies scholarship has inherited the intertwined legacies of critical inquiry and narrative pleasure from a Victorian hermeneutics of suspicion, thereby highlighting her readers’ own critical investments even as she explores Victorian attachments to suspense. As she says: “Suspenseful narratives teach us to take pleasure in the very activity of stopping to
doubt our most entrenched beliefs, waiting for the world to reveal its surprises, its full unyielding otherness. The pleasures of suspense are, then, remarkably serious pleasures” (10). As an extension of this, I would suggest that the payoff for reading Victorian scholarship (for Victorianists) is not just the professional satisfaction of acquiring accurate and comprehensive knowledge; it is also the pleasures of narrative suspense and revelation, of participating in fantasies of critical agency. And if this is true, then the answer to the persistent problem of the “sensational Foucault” is not to embrace a “realist” mode of criticism as somehow truer and less problematic, or more “tasteful.” Rather, we should acknowledge (in order to explore) our attachments to the sensational genre. What are the stakes for the critic who appeals sensationally to his or her audience by offering the “implausible” argument? Or who writes, for example, for a series that offers its readers “brief manuscripts that make brash and revisionary claims”? Or for the critic who deprecates the sensational in criticism? The main question to ask may not be, how should we read the Victorians? but rather, what are we like when we read the Victorians?

EXPLORING AMBIVALENT AGENCY

If recent critiques of Foucault’s disciplinary model have tended to reproduce some of the same sensational tropes that they uncover, some have also explored useful ways to reinvest the disciplined subject with agency. In her essay “The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: Feminist Histories and the Horizon of Modernity” (2000), Amanda Anderson considers problems that arise within Foucauldian scholarship. She argues provocatively that Foucauldian notions of cultural power have led to a kind of theoretical conundrum for studies like Nancy Armstrong’s Desire and Domestic Fiction and Mary Poovey’s Uneven Developments, wherein agency is imagined as continuous with the unreflective forms of power that are simply transmitted by culturally embedded subjects. Yet on the other hand, strange exceptions occur, wherein certain historical subjects are exempted from the networks of power, and consequently granted what I will characterize as “aggrandized agency,” which is marked by both critical lucidity and political potency. (44)
Anderson points to particular figures, like the Brontës for Armstrong and Florence Nightingale for Poovey, who, unlike the run of feminine subjects who are unconscious of their participation in or subjection to cultural power, are granted a political savvy and insight into the workings of disciplinary power that matches that of the critic herself. As Anderson points out: “On one level these critics are skeptical that any such detachment is possible, yet on another level they rely on such detachment for the promulgation of their critical social theories” (52).

The difficulty, as Anderson identifies it, is one of theorizing cultural power and critical agency in a way that, on the one hand, takes into account the ubiquity (and complexity) of modern power and, on the other hand, allows for the possibility of culturally embedded subjects engaging with and critiquing forms of power in self-conscious ways. Anderson argues that we need to pay careful attention to the ways in which the Victorians (and we as their descendants) cultivate an ambivalent relationship to ideals of detachment. She concludes: “The cultivation of detachment—which in some sense is only another name for the examined life—is always an ongoing, partial project, whose interrelated ethical and epistemological dimensions promote the reflexive interrogation of norms and the possibility for individual and collective self-determination” (63).

This is the same issue that Judith Butler explores in The Psychic Life of Power, in which she contends:

A critical analysis of subjection involves: (1) an account of the way regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place; (2) recognition that the subject produced as continuous, visible and located is nevertheless haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation; (3) an account of the iterability of the subject that shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned … The analysis of subjection is always doubled, tracing the conditions of subject formation and tracing the turn against those conditions for the subject—and its perspective—to emerge. (29)

Butler uses the psychoanalytic concept of melancholia to imagine a culturally embedded subject that is, although brought into being by power, not fully accounted for by its subjection. She calls this the
“double-bind of agency”—a paradox whereby the subject, which is a product of power, resists the very thing to which it owes its existence.

Given Anderson’s ongoing critique of Butler’s version of the performative subject, my juxtaposition of the two may seem idiosyncratic. In particular, Anderson criticizes what she sees as Butler’s inability to account for intersubjective and collective agency. Yet I think the two offer similar, and similarly useful, articulations of subjectivity “in process.” Like Anderson’s description of the “ongoing, partial project” of critical detachment, Butler’s emphasis on this double-bind, or ambivalence, wherein the “subject is neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both)” (17), accounts for the notion of the subject as becoming rather than simply being. That is to say, rather than existing in any self-evident way (either as autonomous rational being, or as hapless subject to disciplinary power), one is always in the process of becoming, which, as Butler insists, allows for “the possibility of a re-embodying of the subjectivating norm that can redirect its normativity” (99). This makes novels, with their virtually endless iterability, their demands for affective investments, and their own deep investments in social systems, seem like particularly apt instances to examine the subject’s “reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject” (99). It is this notion of ambivalent agency that I attempt to keep at the forefront as I examine the novels in this study.

As I mentioned earlier, I find the novels of the mid-nineteenth century particularly concerned with theorizing “problematic” versions of subjectivity. This is not to say that one wouldn’t find a species of ambivalent agency in an eighteenth-century Gothic novel like *The Monk* or a modernist novel like *Orlando*. Indeed, my argument may be more generically than historically specific. Nevertheless, at the risk of slipping into the “reigning contextual mode of criticism,” I would suggest that the fierce debates in the 1850s through the 1880s surrounding the legislation of married women’s property forced a crisis in Victorians’ understanding of individual agency, and it is this crisis that plays out in the theoretical texts that I call “problem novels.” As Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon explains in 1854, the Victorian social and legal system treated single and married women very differently: “A single woman has the same rights to property, to protection from the law, and has to pay the same taxes to the State, as a man,” but in marriage
a man and wife are one person in the law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband. He is civilly responsible for her acts; she lives under his protection or cover, and her condition is called coverture ... A woman’s body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by a writ of habeas corpus. (3, 6)

Whereas a single woman could earn and keep money, enter into contracts, sue and be sued, once she chose to enter into a marriage contract she lost the ability to do all of these on her own behalf. Indeed, under coverture a woman could not be convicted of stealing from her husband, because it would be impossible to steal from oneself. In other words, a single woman who had “attained her majority,” who was in possession of her own wealth and person, could exercise her autonomy in order to enter into a marriage contract, under which contract she would forfeit the existence of that autonomous self. Woman, therefore, represented both a figure profoundly beholden to the forces of her subjection and an agent in excess of that subjection—a figure, in other words, ideally situated to embody subjectivity “in process.”

Given the Victorian woman’s ambivalent agency, then, it is not surprising that marriage in many a mid-Victorian novel would present a problem as much as a resolution. The novels that I discuss here engage with this dilemma of ambivalent agency on two levels. First, they explore the “contingent” nature of agency that can be both exercised within and erased by social interactions within their plots. In novels like Wilkie Collins’s No Name, Anthony Trollope’s Can You Forgive Her?, and George Meredith’s Diana of the Crossways, the active, willful heroines are a far cry from the victim-heroines of novels like Clarissa and The Monk, or even the “virtue rewarded” heroines of Pamela and Mansfield Park. Instead these novels feature heroines (and sometimes heroes) who make perverse choices, who commit themselves to dangerous courses or eschew happy endings, or who actively pursue or resist their own disciplining. And, second, for all of these novels, the consideration of readerly affect and subjection occurs at the interstices of genre, where novels play with their own conventions or invoke their own relationship to genre as a rhetorical gesture. Through generically self-conscious plots, the novels explore the reader’s vexed agency, asking what it means for a reader to choose to both accept and critique (critique while accepting) the discipline of the novel.
In chapter 1, “Sensation Fiction Theorizes Masochism,” I consider how mid-Victorian notions of the contract enabled novels to articulate ambivalent agency. I argue that the view of the contract, which Henry Sumner Maine asserted in his 1861 treatise *Ancient Law* was the foremost distinguishing feature of “civilized” society, allows widely disparate writers in the 1860s, Wilkie Collins and John Ruskin, to theorize the construction of a masochistic subject through affective investments in painful reading. In contractual exchange, the law of the family, inheritance, and the father’s legacy are supplanted by relationships forged between individuals and based on mutual obligation. Power and position are no longer only inherited, but can be mobile. Whereas Ruskin’s two lectures “Of Kings’ Treasuries” and “Of Queens’ Gardens,” which *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) comprises, call for readers to “annihilat[e] our own personality” (43) in order to become better selves, Collins’s two novels *No Name* (1862) and *Arma-dale* (1866) enact this dynamic both within the novels’ plots and as a narrative contract between novel and reader—that is, the act of reading is posited as an agreement to suffer. Thus the authors imagine the possibilities for an active, contracting subject, one who does not capitulate unquestioningly to institutional power so much as engage with it, even manipulate it for his or her desired results—a knowing, albeit disciplined, subject for whom the processes of subject production, regulation, and control are at all times visible, explicit, and, most importantly, imbued with a kind of painful pleasure. I argue that this preoccupation with the willingness of characters and readers to suffer suggests a way of rethinking the productive nature of the reader’s affective investments—it offers masochism as a position from which submission and self-consciousness are possible simultaneously.

If one of the promises of late-Victorian realism is to debunk the untruths and exaggerations of sensation fiction, then seemingly the adoption of economic language—the metaphor of the “marriage market,” for example—to describe sexual relationships is part of the process of demystification. This rhetorical conflation of economics and sexuality has led, in large part, to the current critical emphasis on the realist novel’s status as a commodity as well. However, as I argue in chapter 2, “Realism Theorizes Speculative Investments,” the adoption of economic language to describe sexual relationships shows that the Victorians themselves understood that *both* the economic system and the sexual system were dependent on emotionally laden choices, sensational payoffs, symbolic exchanges. This is the
problem for realist fiction: one of the “truths” about the way the system works is that in order for the system to work, the truth must be disavowed—sensational investments are in fact indispensable to the functioning of sexual exchanges, just as speculative investments are indispensable to the functioning of the financial system. The three Anthony Trollope novels discussed in this chapter—*The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* (1862), *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864), and *Miss Mackenzie* (1865)—explore the novelist’s role as a producer of belief in the system of sexual exchange. Moreover, they highlight the contradictory obligations of the reader of realist fiction—simultaneously to invest and to resist investment in the romance.

In the late-Victorian imagination, rhetoric of aesthetic valuation became linked to social-evolutionary progress. For cultural and evolutionary theorists, refinement of public taste not only signified but also *produced* social progress, just as lack of refinement impeded it. Thus, in chapter 3, “The ‘New Fiction’ Theorizes Cultural Consumption,” I examine this intersection of aesthetic standards and social (d)evolution in two novels by George Meredith, *The Egoist* (1879) and *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), alongside his 1877 aesthetic manifesto, *An Essay on Comedy*; Matthew Arnold’s cultural criticism in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864); and Francis Galton’s foundational eugenics treatise, *Hereditary Genius* (1869). Meredith, in both *An Essay* and his novels, imagines the woman reader as crucially linked to the evolution or degeneration of civilization, depending on the extent to which her cultural taste can be educated. He insists on “Comedy” as the antidote to sentimentality and sensationalism in literature and as the key to social progress. If Comedy is the critical lens through which to address society’s foibles, however, it is also a generic structure dependent on sentimental and romantic tropes. Coupling the self-consciously sensationalized romance with social critique grounded in theories of sexual selection and cultural evolution, *The Egoist* and *Diana of the Crossways* ridicule the sentimental reader’s affective attachments to the domestic comedy, yet also encourage complicity with the very sentimentalism they deride, thereby producing a layered analysis of the reader’s responsibility in civilization’s progress.

I argue that this stress on the responsibility of the “cultivated” reader still resonates in literary studies today as the critic’s fantasy of omnipotence—that is, that solely or primarily through the intellectual transmission from critical author (cultural authority) to student/reader may civilization evolve, paradigms shift, and oppressive
power structures be resisted. But Meredith’s understanding of Comedy also tells us to pay attention to how we have been “mixing our private interests” (An Essay 36) with the object of our observation, thereby offering us a way to own our sensational attachments even as we strive for the ideal of critical acuity.

And thus, “my present design being to rouse the reader’s interest” (Collins, No Name 6) in the following chapters—all of which consider the question of genre as they reflect on the limits of readerly investments—I invite my readers to consider their own investments (and my own investments) in this sensational genre too.
INTRODUCTION

1. As Goodlad herself writes: “Foucault’s account of the Panopticon becomes, in effect, precisely the kind of flawed Marxist analysis he sought to avoid: an Althusserian-like theory in which reified ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ (such as the Panopticon) directly dominate through subject constitution” (Victorian 11). And Ruth offers an interesting analysis of the current state of affairs of Victorian studies post-Foucault in her 2006 Novel Professions.

2. Thomas’s work, along with Amanda Anderson’s and Lauren Goodlad’s, is one of the most frequently cited examples of the recuperation of liberal agency. For an interesting response to Anderson’s and Thomas’s recuperation of liberalism, see Elaine Hadley’s “On a Darkling Plain.”

3. I think one problem is that recent critiques of Foucault have tended to focus almost exclusively on Discipline and Punish, which, although extraordinarily influential in Victorian studies, was by no means the only important text. The History of Sexuality and The Birth of the Clinic in particular have been foundational, and in both of these Foucault is careful to avoid characterizing disciplinary power as totalizing or reified.

4. See also Winifred Hughes’s The Maniac in the Cellar.

5. In his 2003 article “Resist Me, You Sweet Resistible You,” Kincaid remarks: “Resistance is conceptualized nowadays within the metaphysics of power and has no currency outside that fashionable and gratuitous paranoia” (1326). Chow makes a similar point in her 2002 article “The Interruption of Referentiality,” in which she writes: “An awareness of historical asymmetries of power, aggression, social antagonism, inequality of representation, and their like cannot simply be accomplished through an adherence to the nebulous concept of resistance and opposition” (185).

6. I am following a number of excellent studies over the past two and a half decades that have addressed real and figurative readers: Kate Flint’s The Woman Reader, Patrick Brantlinger’s The Reading Lesson, Ann Cvetkovich’s Mixed Feelings, Audrey Jaffe’s Scenes of Sympathy, Laurie Langbauer’s Novels of Everyday
Life, Anita Levy’s Reproductive Urges, Terry Lovell’s Consuming Fiction, Jennifer Phegley’s Educating the Proper Woman Reader, Garrett Stewart’s Dear Reader, John Sutherland’s Victorian Fiction, and Nicola Diane Thompson’s Reviewing Sex are just a few. I consider my own work as taking up Kate Flint’s point in The Woman Reader that “the practice of reading, at once pointing inwards and outwards, to the psychological and the socio-cultural, is an ideal site for the examination of Victorian … and contemporary preoccupations: bodies, minds, and texts” (330).

7. A random selection of current books and book reviews, for instance, will show critics referring to scholarly projects in language much akin to the sensation/detective genre. For example, Ian Duncan’s 2004 review of Patrick Brantlinger’s Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races says that Brantlinger “traces the early nineteenth-century consolidation of extinction discourse” (110). Similarly, Melissa Valiska Gregory writes in a 2004 review: “Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky investigate the obscure trace evidence of … physical cruelty in The Marked Body” (689). Likewise, Ann McClintock conceives of Victorian imperialism this way in her 1995 book Imperial Leather: “Knowledge of the unknown world was mapped as a metaphysics of gender violence … In these fantasies, the world is feminized and spatially spread for male exploration, then reassembled and deployed in the interests of massive imperial power” (23).

8. Adams is referring here to Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s The Spectacle of Intimacy.


11. This is the launching point for Anderson’s very elegant analysis, The Powers of Distance. Anderson moves beyond this critique of Foucauldian criticism to an unequivocal endorsement of critical detachment, or “reflective reason,” within a model of procedural democracy that I find less convincing than her diagnosis of the blind spots in current critical theory. See The Way We Argue Now (2006).

12. See chapter 1 of Anderson’s The Way We Argue Now, which also appeared in Social Text 54 (1998).

13. See Mary Lyndon Shanley’s Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895 for a good history of the Divorce, Infant Custody, and Married Women’s Property acts. See also Tim Dolin’s Mistress of the House. Susan Hamilton’s collection “Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors” offers a nice selection of primary texts and an introduction to women’s involvement in the debates surrounding the issues grouped under the rubric of the “Woman Question.”
“The readers who are excited by the sensational lure of [the novels’] mysteries are provided with experiences of affect that are ultimately regulated and controlled” (7). See also, for example, Anthea Trodd’s Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel, in which she writes: “The narrative [of Lady Audley’s Secret] is largely presented from Robert’s point of view, and like Basil is a masculine inquiry into the mystery of domesticity. Robert, who initially endorses the domestic ideal Lady Audley so brilliantly impersonates, gradually discovers the sinister secrets which lie behind her realisation of this ideal” (105).

2. As Foucault asserts in Discipline and Punish: “Disciplinary power … is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is being exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able to always be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (187).

3. I want to distinguish this from the role of the “suffering woman” that Ann Cvetkovich describes in Mixed Feelings as the heroine’s passive submission to pain that is then converted into a sensationalized (eroticized) spectacle for the reader’s delectation (100). For example, in East Lynne by Mrs. Henry Wood, Lady Isabel’s pain becomes the reader’s pleasure; she herself experiences no pleasure in it and, indeed, is powerless to avoid it. The conversion of pain to pleasure—in this model—is more a function of experiencing a sadistic enjoyment of someone else’s unwilling suffering than it is of identifying with the self-designated sufferer. Conversely, the suffering in both No Name and Armadale is not only articulated, but is also often self-inflicted and deliberate.

4. See, for example Leo Bersani’s account of the “shattering” of the self through masochism in The Freudian Body, or Carol Siegel’s Male Masochism.

5. For a good critique of the problems in feminist theory with masochism, see Lynda Hart’s analysis in Between the Body and the Flesh. See also Marianne Noble’s The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature. Noble’s analysis of the eroticism of language in sentimental literature does an excellent job of addressing how, precisely, these texts participate in the production and proliferation of masochistic fantasies. However, she also tends to focus on female masochism as submission (albeit willing or at least complicit) to a specifically heterosexual, masculine, dominant regime.

6. F. Scott Scribner, in his article “Masochism and the Modern Ethical Ideal (1788–1887),” makes an interesting argument about what the masochistic contract does by turning away from the moral absolutism of Kantian ethics: “The masochistic contract offers an ethics insofar as it is an reenactment of the social contract, that refuses the totalizing gesture of the universal, while nevertheless offering a sensual ideal, grounded in the uniqueness of the situation and secured through the freely chosen law of the contract. Masoch’s fiction is an intervention that affirms the particularity of an individual incarnation of an ideal as a model of social interaction, rather than the universality of the ‘law’ or the ‘Good’” (79).

7. For a fascinating explication of Maine’s Ancient Law in relation to Victorian sexual exchange see Kathy Psomiades’s “Heterosexual Exchange and Other Victorian Fictions,” in which she describes Maine’s distinction between primitive society and “contemporary” Victorian society: “The world of individuals,
property, and contract that allows both capitalism and civilization to exist has a ‘before’ marked by the absence of all its distinguishing features. The primitive world is stationary, rather than progressive; one in which goods and people stay put, rather than circulate; a world of the group, rather than the individual; of the family, rather than the territorial state; of the unwritten law that is the parent’s word, rather than the written law” (100).

8. In this I directly disagree with Massé, who writes: “Critics of the sublime school often find that a woman’s suffering ‘stands for’ something else. As a feminist, I do not entertain this hypothesis or find it entertaining. When a woman is hurt … the damage is not originally self-imposed: we must acknowledge that someone else strikes the first blow” (3).

9. Deborah Wynne offers a comprehensive examination of sensation novels, their serial publication, and critical reception in The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine. See also Flint.

10. See, for example, Gesa Stedman’s Stemming the Torrent for a discussion of the complicated articulations of the mind-body connection in Victorian psychological discourse. See also Athena Vrettos, Rebecca Stern, Jenny Bourne Taylor, Sally Shuttleworth, Ann Cvetkovich, Evelyn Ender, and Jane Wood. This is by no means a complete list. Most interestingly, in his 2004 article “Wave Theories and Affective Physiologies,” Nicholas Dames suggests that nineteenth-century discussions of novel-reading convey a complex theory that “in its combination of physiological investigation with literary analysis, presents us with a vanished interdisciplinary formation, as well as an approach to the novel that might have renewed interest today as a precursor to an interdisciplinary theory of the reader, particularly the novel-reader” (207).

11. See Karen Odden’s article “‘Reading Coolly’ in John Marchmont’s Legacy” for an interesting account of how one sensation author imagined women reading simultaneously in two modes: “one in which she empathetically engages with the characters, and the other, in which she sustains self-awareness about herself as a reader” (23).

12. Ruskin differentiates between “the good book of the hour,” in which group of pleasant and mildly useful texts the novel belongs, and the “good book of all time,” in which the “greats” like Milton and Dante fall (32). The “good books of all time” are, of course, the ones to which one should submit oneself most thoroughly.

13. For an interesting account of the strangeness of Ruskin’s rhetoric in Sesame and Lilies, see Seth Koven’s “How the Victorians Read Sesame and Lilies.” See also Elizabeth Helsinger’s essay “Authority and the Pleasures of Reading,” in which she notes that the submission to the text that Ruskin promotes is not passive acquiescence, but rather a “complex mixture of obedience and freedom” (116).

14. Neither No Name nor Armadale have received the critical attention of The Woman in White or The Moonstone, but critics who do address them describe them in superlative terms (most convoluted, most perverse, most radical, etc.). Deirdre David, for example, contends in “Rewriting the Male Plot in Wilkie Collins’s No Name (1862)” that “no [other] Collins novel … so interestingly conflates resistance to dominant aesthetic and sexual ideologies as No Name” (34), although she also claims, rather inexplicably, that this resistance means that the novel “rattles
no nerves with sensational excitement” (35). Jenny Bourne Taylor, who reads
the novel within discourses of evolution and psychology, does acknowledge
the novel’s sensationalism, remarking that as “Collins’s most explicit treatment
of the formation of social identity and of the cultural construction of femininity
outside and inside the family,” No Name “is a story of ‘perversity.’ … It is also a
perverse story” (132).

15. Think, for example, of the suspicious reticence of The Moonstone’s heroine,
Rachel Verinder, in regard to the disappearance of the diamond.

16. Magdalen’s parents have pretended to be married while Mr. Vanstone
is still married to a terrible, degenerate woman in Canada, so both Magdalen
and her sister, Norah, are illegitimate. But when the first wife dies, while the
dughters are in their teens, the parents marry immediately, unfortunately
without realizing that this demands they make new wills so that the illegitimate
daughters will not be disinherited. They both die before they can rectify their
mistake.

17. Critics have tended to argue that the heroines of sensation novels are
morally suspect, citing as the primary example Lady Audley. It seems to me,
however, that at no time in the novel is she the heroine or protagonist. Rather,
the amateur sleuth Robert Audley is the hero, and Lady Audley is the fascinating
villainess. This may seem like a minor distinction, but it is crucial to under-
standing Collins’s experimentation with the form of the sensation novel in his
portrayal of Magdalen.

18. Indeed, under the law of coverture, this “death wish” was not just a psy-
chological metaphor but a legal reality.

19. Magdalen, eager to marry Frank, sends her father on a last-minute trip to
his lawyer to arrange her marriage settlement, and he is killed in an accident en
route.

20. Caroline Reitz offers an interesting analysis of this vexed history of colo-
nial violence and guilt in her article “Colonial ‘Gwilt.’”

21. Interestingly, Victorian treatises on masochism suggested that schoolroom
beatings could become “erotic flagellation,” which would then produce in the
beaten boys the desire to masturbate or, worse, the propensity for masochism in
later life.

22. For an interesting discussion of the various significances with which Vic-
torian culture imbued the racially ambiguous figure of the gypsy, see Deborah
Epstein Nord’s “‘Marks of Race.’”

23. She disappears somewhere in the middle of the third book and never
shows up again in person.

CHAPTER 2

1. See, for example, Henry James’s review of The Belton Estate: “Mr. Trollope
is a good observer; but he is literally nothing else … All his incidents are, if we
may so express it, empirical. He has seen and heard every act and every speech
that appears in his pages” (258).

2. For a detailed account of James’s treatment of Trollope, see Elsie Michie’s
“The Odd Couple.” See also Kincaid, The Novels of Anthony Trollope.
3. Trollope repeats these sentiments in *An Autobiography*, in his lectures “On the Higher Education of Women” (1868), and in his essay “On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement” (1870). Although he was no great fan of Ruskin, this language also echoes Ruskin’s criticism of the public in “Of Kings’ Treasuries” for not recognizing that books are worth more than “munching and sparkling” (50)—that is, reading is not the same as consuming commodities like food and jewelry.

4. See also Andrew Miller’s *Novels Behind Glass*, Rachel Bowlby’s *Just Looking*, and Terry Lovell’s *Consuming Fiction*, among others.

5. The special issue includes essays by Timothy Alborn, David Iztkowitz, Audrey Jaffe, Donna Loftus, and Mary Poovey.

6. This is a position that Mary Poovey elucidates in the introduction to her anthology, *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain*: “First, the lack of readily available information means that every piece of writing about finance in this period was an attempt to understand and interpret something that was only partially visible and constantly in a state of change. This means, in turn, that we should not read selections included here as straightforward descriptions. Even the entries taken from dictionaries, like McCulloch’s *Dictionary of Commerce and Commercial Navigation*, need to be read as interpretive descriptions, which are informed both by their authors’ proximity to existing sources of information and by their own theoretical and political positions on issues that were often highly controversial and imperfectly understood” (4–5).


8. Similarly, much of the recent criticism exploring speculation and gambling casts the financial figure—Melмотte of Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* being the urexample—as the bogeyman of the realist novel. See, for example, J. Jeffrey Franklin’s “The Victorian Discourse of Gambling” and his *Serious Play*, or Audrey Jaffe’s “Trollope in the Stock Market.”

9. In her book *Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism: Through the Looking Glass*, Katherine Kearns describes this kind of (psycho)analytical approach to Victorian realism: “Critics and marketing strategies … may thus promote realism as both fictional and true all at once: like the madman, incompetent as regards the really real, whatever the hermeneutic integrity of its visions, while, again like the madman, unimpeachable in its communication of a historical reality. Thus we see the paperback edition of *Adam Bede* using a fragment from the critical preface by Stephen Gill as promotion copy: ‘Reading the novel,’ says the cover, ‘is a process of learning simultaneously about the world of Adam Bede and the world of Adam Bede.’ In this marketing strategy, fictional realism shares a space with texts produced within the asylum … Realism is said to tell a (historical) truth despite itself even as it does not tell the truth” (7).

10. See Mary Poovey’s introduction to *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain* for a good description of the legislation in the middle decades (1844–1862) that facilitated the growth of joint stock companies and individual investors (16–17).
11. David Itzkowitz, in his article “Fair Enterprise or Extravagant Speculation,” offers a fascinating account of the rhetorical constructions of “legitimate” investing vs. morally suspect “speculation,” which, he argues, became increasingly legitimized as it lost its connections to gambling in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. See also Audrey Jaffe’s “Trollope in the Stock Market” for a discussion of the rhetorical distinction between investment and speculation.

12. For an interesting discussion of women and the stock market, see Andrew Miller’s article “Subjectivity Ltd.”

13. Trollope’s paradoxical adherence to formal resolution and irresolution has been the crux of critical attention both from critics like Deborah Denenholz Morse and Jane Nardin, who want to consider how sympathetic or misogynist his portrayal of “real” women is, and from critics like Laurie Langbauer and Patrick Brantlinger who want to define the limits of his realism. As Morse notes, Trollope alters the “narrative conventions that embody the conventional view that feminine fulfillment lies only in love and marriage. The structure of the romantic courtship plot is broken in every novel, and there are elements that qualify the perfect closure in each novel’s comic resolution” (3). See also George Levine’s The Realistic Imagination, James Kincaid’s The Novels of Anthony Trollope, and Christopher Herbert’s “Trollope and the Fixity of Self,” among many others, for accounts of the narrative tension in Trollope’s novels.

14. In her 1854 English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century, a pamphlet calling for legislative reform, Norton compares her situation to the case of a slave in Ohio who sued his owner when the owner, who had contracted with the slave to allow him to buy his freedom, rescinded the contract after the money was paid:

The case was argued with much ability; but at the close of the argument the judge decided for Mr Patton against Sam Norris, on this principle, that by the law of Kentucky “a slave cannot make a contract, nor can he have monies of his own.” The contract, therefore, was null and void; and the money, though received and expended by the master, could not be held legally to have been paid … I find, in the slave law of Kentucky, an exact parallel of the law of England for its married women; and in this passage in the life of the poor slave Sam Norris, an exact counterpart of what has lately occurred in my own.

I, too, had a contract. My husband being desirous to raise money settled on me and my sons, to employ on his separate estate, and requiring my consent in writing before that could be done, gave me in exchange for such consent a written contract drawn up by a lawyer, and signed by that lawyer and himself. When he had obtained and employed the money he was desirous to raise, like Mr Patton of Virginia he resolved to “rescind the contract.” When I, like the slave Norris, endeavoured to struggle against this gross breach of faith,—I was informed that by the law of England, “a married woman could not make a contract, or have monies of her own.” (19)

15. As is probably familiar to most readers, Cobbe is responding, as did numerous others (most famously W. R. Greg), to the 1851 census, which created a huge stir by showing a surfeit of single women in England. Greg’s solution was to “export” single women to the colonies where there were more single
men. Trollope himself alludes to the problem in his 1868 lecture “On the Higher Education of Women”: “It does not go smoothly with you all. There is not quite enough of money, not quite enough of feminine occupation,—not quite enough, perhaps, of husbands: and therefore … you are all to be thrown into the labour market, and hustle and tustle for your bread amidst the rivalry of men. I do not myself think that you can improve your chances in life that way” (76).

16. This is a plot that recurs in different permutations in many Trollope novels, including *The Belton Estate* and *The Prime Minister*.

17. Critics have suggested that Miss Todd is, in fact, modeled after Frances Power Cobbe.

18. *Can You Forgive Her?* received quite a bit of positive praise from critics, even though, as Henry James notes in a review for the *Nation*, it includes “a certain amount of that inconceivably vulgar love-making between middle-aged persons by which ‘Miss Mackenzie’ was distinguished” (249). But even critics who applauded Trollope’s portrayal of Lady Glencora and Plantagenet Palliser found Alice Vavasor hard to take.

19. Ironically, Henry James in his review of *Can You Forgive Her?* complains that George is not sensational enough, and having undertaken to represent a desperate character, Trollope should have gone all the way and had him kill someone or himself. (249–53)

20. We can gauge the magnitude of the tragedy threatened because a very similar one comes to fruition in *The Prime Minister* when Emily Wharton is not prevented from throwing herself away on Ferdinand Lopez, and only his eventual suicide (after his political and financial ruin) saves her and her family from permanent disgrace.

### CHAPTER 3

1. McGlamery also offers an interesting Bakhtinian account of Meredith’s difficult, yet instructive, preface in *Diana of the Crossways* in her article “In His Beginning, His Ends.” See also Judith Wilt’s *The Readable People of George Meredith*, a sensitive and generous reading of Meredith in relation to his readers.

2. For example, Carolyn Williams writes in “Natural Selection and Narrative Form in *The Egoist*”: “Darwinism works as the touchstone of the novel’s dramatic irony when it is falsely understood by the central character, the male Egoist Willoughby Patterne, and … the true working of natural selection appears as a principle of narrative form, organizing the novel’s plot, character development, and figurative language” (55). Williams offers one of the best and most detailed accounts of *The Egoist*’s Darwinism. Jonathan Smith and Patricia O’Hara also offer good explications of evolutionary rhetoric in the novel.

3. This is the gist of McGlamery’s article “In His Beginnings, His Ends.”

4. Caroline Norton was a renowned beauty and wit, a successful novelist and poet with influential friends in government and fashionable society. In 1826 she married George Norton, who was, by all accounts, an unintelligent, impecunious, and abusive husband. Their much-publicized custody, property, and divorce disputes began in 1836 when George Norton took their three sons from her. Under the law Caroline had no right to her children. George brought
a charge of “criminal conversation” against Caroline’s friend Lord Melbourne. Lord Melbourne won the case, which exonerated Caroline of wrongdoing, but she lost custody of her children. And, under the current law, she was unable to sue for divorce. She mounted a campaign to give mothers custodial rights to their children, writing the pamphlet *A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill* (1839), and the Infant Custody Act was passed in 1839. George and Caroline continued to have property disputes—she attempting to retain rights to her property and he attempting to eschew responsibility for her debts—over the next fourteen years. In a second lawsuit in 1853 George again cited Lord Melbourne’s relationship with Caroline and won his freedom from financial responsibility for her debts. Caroline turned her attention to campaigning for revisions to the marriage and divorce laws. She wrote the pamphlets *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854) and *A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill* (1855). Caroline, unlike Meredith’s heroine, was not able to remarry until after George died in 1877, when she was sixty-nine years old, and although this marriage to her longtime friend Sir William Stirling-Maxwell probably was happy, she was in poor health and died after only a few months. For a more-detailed discussion of the marriage laws and Caroline’s campaigns to reform them, see Mary Shanley’s *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895*. See also Tim Dolin’s *Mistress of the House.*

5. As such, the anxiety is one already inherent in Darwin’s own accounts of sexual selection. Darwin’s position on sexual selection in humans is notoriously slippery; he seems at times to argue that Woman in civilization no longer has the prerogative of choice, but at other times he maintains that civilized Woman has more freedom than her savage counterpart, and yet again he claims that savage Woman has more freedom to choose her mate than is at first apparent. However, vacillations notwithstanding, Darwin defines sexual selection thus in *Descent of Man*: “The sexual struggle is of two kinds; in the one it is between the individuals of the same sex, generally the male sex, in order to drive away or kill their rivals, the females remaining passive; whilst in the other, the struggle is likewise between the individuals of the same sex, in order to excite or charm those of the opposite sex, generally the females, which no longer remain passive, but select the more agreeable partners” (398).

I am indebted to Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* for its groundbreaking discussion of the nuances of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection. Rosemary Jann also offers an excellent account of Darwin’s complicated rhetoric. As she explains: “By shifting his definition of instinctual sexual behavior in animals, he could project a version of the modern patriarchal family back across the border between animal and man. But this rhetorical move left him unable fully to explain what had subverted the sexual prerogatives of female animals or had produced the ‘unnatural’ behavior of the earliest savage cultures. The result was a narrative implicitly fragmented into rival discourses of continuity and rupture, progression and regression” (289).

6. This kind of dichotomy is perhaps most famously articulated by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide*, and although he himself problematizes the dichotomy, it is one that continues to inform discussions of the shift from Victorian to modern.
7. Woolf’s essay collections feature dozens of essays that implicitly, and often explicitly, consider the question of “how to read.” Aside from the obvious “How Should One Read a Book?,” other essays such as “Reading,” “Hours in a Library,” “The Art of Fiction,” and “Modern Fiction” (not to mention “The Novels of George Meredith” and “On Re-Reading Meredith”) also speak seemingly to a readership that is not so “highbrow” as to be unable to benefit from instruction. Alison Pease offers a fascinating discussion of modernist articulations of the ethical dimensions of “the education of aesthetic reception” in “Readers with Bodies” (93).

8. Garrett Stewart remarks of Meredith’s theory of Comedy that it “implies—in a teleological paradox—that true Comedy can only exist in the kind of highly evolved society that only true Comedy can help bring to maturity” (286).

9. As Amanda Anderson notes in The Powers of Distance: “Arnold saw the project of ethnology as subordinate to the larger, normative project of ideal culture for the individual, for the nation, and for humanity as a whole. The attempt to build the project of culture upon the findings of ethnology in fact stands at the heart of … Culture and Anarchy” (103–4). See also George Stocking’s essay “Arnold, Tylor, and the Uses of Invention,” in which he finds more similarities between Arnold and cultural anthropologist E. B. Tylor than are immediately visible, in that culture exists on a continuum for Tylor, such that it reaches its “full flowering” in civilization (as opposed to savagery or barbarism, earlier stages on the continuum). Thus, the “data” of European civilization are inherently superior to the data of a barbarous (non-European) society. See also Vincent Pecora’s article “Arnoldian Ethnology” for an interesting rereading of Arnold’s ethnographic tendencies.

10. For a good overview of eugenics in England and how Galton fits into the movement, see Peter Morton’s The Vital Science.

11. Amanda Anderson argues, for example, that Arnold’s emphasis on the study of perfection becomes a paradoxical insistence on what she calls “embodied universality,” a particularized, “self-authorized” version of selfless and transcendent detachment. This emphasis on the particularized universal leads Anderson to suggest a reconsideration of Arnold in relation to Pater and Wilde—not antagonistic, as it is generally read, but similarly concerned with subjective experience. Regina Gagnier posits a similar claim in her article “The Law of Progress and the Ironies of Individualism in the Nineteenth Century,” in which she argues that a shift in economic paradigms from a reproduction- and distribution-based model to one based on consumption and an “economics of choice, preference, and Taste” (325) parallels the shift in literary movements from the “high-Victorian [novel] plot of social relations” to the “individualism, psychologism and subjectivism” (315) of Aestheticism. Gagnier offers a socio-economic explanation for modernism’s retreat from the marketplace and the social realm. Richard Kaye in The Flirt’s Tragedy makes a similar argument, with Darwin rather than Arnold as the starting point of his Victorian-to-modern trajectory. He posits not just that “sexual selection’s emergence as a scientific argument coincided with the rise of Paterian aestheticism,” but that “Darwin’s theory of male self-fashioning in The Descent provided an inadvertent basis for [the] Wildean credo … of sexuality emancipated from ‘purposeful’ predilections” (91–92).
12. Margaret Oliphant notes this dynamic, with bitter irony, in her 1880 review of *The Egoist*: “The author of *The Egoist* holds an exceptional position in literature. He is not a favourite with the multitude, but if that is any compensation, he is a favourite with people who are supposed to know much better than the multitude. His works come before us rarely; but when they do come, there is a little tremor of expectation in the air. The critics pull themselves up, the demigods of the newspapers are all on the alert. It is understood that here is something which, though in all probability caviare to the general, it will be a creditable thing, and a point in a man’s favour to admire. Like Mr Rossetti’s pictures, there is a certain ignorance, a certain want of capacity involved in the absence of appreciation. Not to know Mr Meredith is to argue yourself unknown” (236). This rhetorical dynamic is also ably described by Bill Bell in relation to Matthew Arnold in his article “Beyond the Death of the Author.”

13. The language here is important. The “cultivation of aristocracy” plays with the two (of many) meanings of “culture”: “good breeding” as in the refinement that comes of a high degree of civilization, and “good breeding” as in the judicious management of domestic animals—which are, in fact, at odds with one another. Clearly, the novel’s portrayal of Willoughby suggests that both the refinement of culture and the process of sexual selection are thwarted by the cultivation of the aristocracy; Willoughby will indeed void the guarantee for the “noblest race of men to come.”

14. Ann Cvetkovich says of *East Lynne* in *Mixed Feelings*: “*East Lynne* transforms a narrative of female transgression into a lavish story about female suffering, a suffering that seems to exceed any moral or didactic requirement that the heroine be punished for her sins” (100).

15. My own rhetorical use of “we” may seem intrusive here, but it is, I would suggest, precisely this uncomfortable inclusiveness that Meredith seeks to impose on his readers.


17. Robert Polhemus’s reading of *The Egoist* in *The Comic Faith* does justice to the complexity and self-reflexivity of Meredith’s idea of Comedy, which involves a “comic dialectic of egoism: his optimism, his belief in progress, and his challenge to each of us who reads it. We must ‘consider’ the egoist ‘indulgently,’ since he is part of us and we of him; we can’t escape our kinship except by lying or obtuseness” (208).

18. Certainly from her inception onward Diana has inspired critical readings that seek to account for her psychological inconsistencies. Why does she marry Augustus Warwick? Why does she betray Dacier’s political secret to the Press? As Mary Sturge Gretton writes in her 1907 study of Meredith’s work: “The events and psychology of the book appear to us, not only not interwoven, but spun of materials so different in texture that they could not combine” (268). See Dolin, Boumelha, Beer, and McGlamery for contemporary examples. It is not my intention to enter into the debate here.

19. Vernon, imagining Clara wet with the rain, “clasps[s] the visionary little feet to warm them on his breast” (321). And after he finds her and takes her to the inn beside the train station to dry her shoes and stockings and makes her drink some of his hot brandy and water, Clara thinks of her exciting position:
“They were to drink out of the same glass; and she was to drink some of the infamous mixture; and she was in a kind of hotel alone with him; and he was drenched in running after her;—all this came of breaking loose for an hour” (326).

20. The relationship between Emma and Diana (or as Emma calls Diana, “her Tony”) is emotionally intense and physically and verbally effusive, well beyond typical Victorian representations of female platonic relationships in novels, although the sisters’ relationship in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” with its overabundance of fruit juice and kissing, is close, as is the vampiric relationship in Sheridan Le Fanu’s _Carmilla_. Boumelha addresses the complex relationship.

21. See, for example, Gillian Beer’s _Meredith: A Change of Masks_ and also Harvey Kerpneck’s 1963 note “George Meredith, Sun-Worshipper, and Diana’s Redworth.”

CHAPTER 4

1. One should observe that when Robert meets Clara Talboys, George’s sister, hers becomes the hand that commands him to investigate, but these particular passages occur before he meets her.

2. At this moment in the novel, the reader too reinvests in Robert Audley’s serious work. The numbered list of clues is by now a common device of the detective story; the narrative pause allows the reader to make sure that he or she is tuned into the mystery thus far, in possession of all information necessary to solving it, and willing to continue reading. Indeed, one might say that the reader’s pleasure is fueled by the painful seriousness with which Robert approaches his task. One imagines that _Lady Audley’s Secret_ would not engage its readers as effectively (and affectively) if Robert’s pleasure in his “pitiless” investigation superseded his angst and not the other way around.
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