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“The Fashions of the Current Season”: Recent Critical Work on Victorian Sensation Fiction

By Anne-Marie Beller

No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of [the sensation novelist’s] work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply; no more immortality is dreamed of for it than for the fashions of the current season.

--Henry Mansel

HENRY MANSEL, WRITING IN 1863, was confident in his prediction that the current popular vogue for sensation novels was an ephemeral phase, soon to pass into a deserved oblivion. Yet by the end of a decade marked by extensive and frequently hysterical debates over the genre, the future Poet Laureate, Alfred Austin, was still bemoaning the ubiquity of sensation fiction: “the world may congratulate itself when the last sensational novel has been written and forgotten” (424). Mansel and Austin would doubtless have been astounded (and appalled) at the current status of mid-Victorian sensation fiction in the realm of academic scholarship. Far from being a long-forgotten, inconsequential moment in literary history, the sensation novels of authors such as Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, and Ouida have prompted a plethora of critical studies, which have impacted on our wider understanding of the dynamics and influences of mid-Victorian literary and publishing practices.

As Mark Knight noted in his 2009 review of trends in the academic study of the sub-genre, “the critical appeal of sensation fiction and Victorian crime shows no sign of abating. If anything, the first few years of the twenty-first century have seen even greater levels of interest” (323). Since Knight’s review essay appeared, these levels of attention have persisted, and the field is currently flourishing. This present essay is an attempt to identify

and trace the recent developments in sensation fiction studies with a view to establishing the effects of such work on the wider body of Victorian studies. Given the volume of criticism produced in the last seven years, it is not possible to offer a comprehensive account here. Instead, I have privileged monographs and critical collections over journal articles for the most part, and attempted to identify perceptible trends in the direction of current scholarship.

Two publications, in 2011 and 2013 respectively, marked a coming-of-age for academic study of sensation fiction. *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, published by Wiley Blackwell and edited by Pamela K. Gilbert, provided the first comprehensive guide to and overview of the sub-genre. More than simply an introductory textbook for students, the Blackwell *Companion* offers depth as well as breadth, encompassing within its four sections and forty-eight chapters, a variety of approaches to individual authors, key themes, influences, precursors, and legacies. Part I, “Before Sensation, 1830-1860,” deals with genres that preceded and arguably influenced sensation fiction, such as the Newgate Novel, melodrama, penny fiction and cheap serials, the gothic, realism, and sensation theatre. There is even an interesting chapter, by Kirstie Blair, which examines the under-researched relationship between poetry and sensation fiction, focusing on the genre’s connections with Browning, Tennyson, Swinburne, and the Pre-Raphaelite poets. In the second section, “Reading Individual Authors and Texts, 1860-1880,” chapters take on an impressive range of novelists, from the better-known names of Collins, Braddon, Charles Reade, Ouida, Rhoda Broughton, and Ellen Wood through to less frequently discussed figures such as Charlotte Brame, Mary Hay, Dora Russell, Amelia B. Edwards, and Edmund Yates. Particular highlights here are Janice M. Allan’s essay on Dora Russell, a writer heralded in 1894 as “the sole heir of Miss Braddon” (Gilbert 361) but virtually invisible in modern scholarship, and Graham Law’s authoritative chapter on the immensely popular romantic fiction of Charlotte Brame and Mary Hay. The chapters of both Allan and Law contribute significantly to our

understanding of sensational fiction in the decades following the 1860s and, in this way, continue the prevalent current tendency to view literary sensationalism in its broader temporal parameters, rather than as a phenomenon largely confined to a single decade.

The space allotted to different writers reflects, to some extent, the current level of critical attention devoted to them. Thus, Collins is given three chapters (a critical overview of his authorship, as well as individual essays on The Woman in White and The Moonstone). Perhaps surprisingly, given Collins's traditional ascendancy within the genre, Braddon boasts five separate chapters: an overview of her life and work by Lyn Pykett, and essays offering detailed readings of Lady Audley's Secret, The Doctor's Wife, Aurora Floyd, and Joshua Haggard's Daughter. The space devoted to Braddon reflects the considerable increase in critical attention she has received over recent decades, a point to which I will return. In part III, devoted to "Topics in Scholarship," the reader is offered useful contexts for reading sensation fiction within its historical moment. Class and race, gender, empire, the law, science, and religion are all given careful consideration, as well as critical approaches such as Queer Theory and Disability Studies. The final section, "After Sensation: Legacies," considers the various literary forms into which sensation transmuted: New Woman writing of the fin de siècle, the popular sensationalism of Marie Corelli, the less obvious relationship between sensation fiction and the late nineteenth-century realism of Hardy, Gissing, and Meredith, through to contemporary neo-Victorian fiction. As Gilbert suggests in her introduction, the Companion aims to "give the reader both the broad understanding of sensation and the specific information on the state of scholarship necessary to advance in the comprehension of the literature as well as the production of new scholarship" (9). In this objective the collection succeeds, as its extensive treatment of the genre will ensure it remains an invaluable resource for many years to come, while at the same time pointing the way towards, and providing the impetus for, new directions of enquiry.

Two years after the publication of Blackwell's Companion, sensation fiction studies confirmed its established presence on the academic scene by being admitted to the Cambridge Companion series. Edited by Andrew Mangham, The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction is more streamlined than the Blackwell, containing fifteen commissioned essays on various aspects of the genre. Instead of focusing chapters on specific authors or texts, Mangham chooses to structure the Companion thematically, which allows contributors to place individual writers and novels in dialogue with one another. While this inevitably leads to some overlap at times, the benefit of this structure is the cogent and incisive treatment of key areas in each chapter. As a chief aim of the series is in large part to provide a succinct and informative introduction for university students, the Companion of necessity covers many of the themes and contexts already familiar to those working in the field. However, in addition to the necessary coverage of the customary topics such as gender, class, race, and empire, there are also suggestions of new directions in scholarship, such as Mariaconcetta Costantini's excellent chapter on the rising professional classes, and the engaging discussion of illustration and the sensation novel by Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge.

Richard Nemesvari, a seminal influence in the "queering" of sensation fiction, offers a thoroughly convincing account of the ways in which the genre evokes (and ultimately works to contain) non-normative and transgressive gender performance, "along with the 'perverse' sexualities this type of performance implies" (Mangham 83). Reading Nemesvari's essay in conjunction with Tara MacDonald's thought-provoking chapter on gender and identity (as well as in the context of the numerous engagements with contemporary negotiations of femininity and masculinity throughout the collection) provides clear evidence of the fertile nature of the genre for an exploration of Victorian gender in its broadest possible terms. Due to their different approaches and methods of organization, the two companions avoid undue

overlap or repetition, and instead complement one another through extensive coverage of key issues and theoretical approaches. Taken together, not only do they offer a valuable resource to both the student and scholar of sensation fiction, they also provide an effective measure of the diversity of interesting work being undertaken.

Broadly speaking, the trajectory of critical work on sensation fiction from the 1970s and 1980s to the end of the twentieth century can be summed up as an initial phase of recovery (by Kathleen Tillotson, Elaine Showalter, P. D. Edwards, Winifred Hughes, and others), often accompanied and certainly succeeded by a focus on socio-historical debates and the genre's negotiation of femininity (Showalter again, Lyn Pykett), through to the more theoretical approaches of the 1990s (Pykett, Ann Cvetkovich, Pamela Gilbert, D. A. Miller, to name just a few prominent interventions). I would argue that a key impetus of recent scholarship on the sensation novel has been a return to a second phase of recovery. For a long time, critical work in this area maintained a rather narrow focus on the triumvirate of Collins, Braddon, and Wood, and on a handful of bestselling novels from the early 1860's. Following Andrew Maunder's seminal six-volume collection, Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction, 1855–1890 (2004), which opened up both the former temporal markers of the genre and the circle of proponents involved in producing it, other critics have sought to extend the parameters, with a view to ascertaining a fuller picture of sensation writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In Maunder's erudite introduction to the six-volume collection, he highlights the heterogeneity of novels grouped together by Victorian critics under the label "sensation novel." Maunder and his fellow volume editors identify distinct forms of sensation writing, differentiating between "newspaper," "domestic," "gothic," "polemical," and "erotic" sensationalism. More recent work has followed this interrogation of the different forms of writing previously homogenized somewhat problematically under the sensation fiction tag. A good example is Tabitha Sparks's essay in the edited collection Reassessing

Victorian Women Sensation Writers (ed. Beller and MacDonald), which makes a compelling case for acknowledging a new category within or even merely akin to the sensation novel – the “novel of experience.” Sparks’s essay focuses on Matilda Houston’s Recommended to Mercy, published anonymously in 1862 and included by H. L. Mansel in his oft-cited 1863 review of sensation fiction. Sparks convincingly demonstrates that, despite superficial similarities to the typical sensation narrative, Houston’s novel evinces key differences that warrant a rethinking of previous generic classifications. The “novel of experience,” as Sparks defines it, features an experienced heroine and controversial social themes. Although such novels may include typical sensation tropes, such as bigamy and crime, these are balanced by the use of realism and metafictional narrative techniques.

Reappraisals of genre in this way have only become possible due to the scholarly recovery of Victorian popular fiction in recent years. If in some ways the large-scale digitization projects of Google Books, Internet Archive, and others have democratized the field, allowing widespread access to Victorian authors written out of literary history long ago, recovery as a process also brings with it challenging questions – such as what do we *do* with the texts and authors we recover? Are they all actually worth recovering? Are we challenging the existing canon through such work, questioning the ideological assumptions underlying canonization, or simply constructing new canons? In favour of such recovery projects, I would echo Maunder’s view of the benefits:

One of the things which recent revisionist work has recovered and evaluated is a mass of fiction by women writers that was highly influential in the development of the novel in mid-Victorian Britain. There is a growing acceptance that reading these novels by women in their literary context, enriches our understanding and interpretation of Victorian fiction generally. (Maunder ix)

In accordance with this belief, Tara MacDonald and I co-edited a 2013 special issue of Women's Writing entitled "Beyond Braddon: Reassessing Female Sensationalists."¹ Our motivation for the issue was a mutual desire to explore and showcase the current scholarly work being undertaken in the area of neglected popular women writers. The completed collection offered new work on names that, if not canonical, are now fairly recognisable in Victorian Studies – Rhoda Broughton, Ouida, Florence Marryat, and Mrs Henry Wood, as well as more neglected writers such as Amelia B. Edwards and Matilda Houston, and even an essay on George Eliot's relationship to the sensation genre. We were, finally, unable to locate existing critical work on a number of authors in whom we were interested: Annie Thomas, Mrs. Gordon Smythies, Mrs Mackenzie Daniels, Annie Edwardes, Annie French (Mrs Annie Hector Alexander), Mrs C. J. Newby (Emma Warburton), Charlotte Riddell, to name just a handful of novelists who played a key role in shaping the public and critical understanding of sensation fiction in the nineteenth century. Work remains to be done in this area, since, not only does the recovery of popular novels provide a fuller, more accurate picture of the literary landscape of the period, it also enables us to make clearer distinctions about what actually constituted sensation fiction for mid-Victorian readers and reviewers. By going beyond the novels that have become canonical within the genre – e.g., Lady Audley's Secret and The Woman in White – and indeed beyond the authors of those works, scholars can identify new patterns and different types of sensationalism within the group of fiction that was so labelled.

Another trend in recent years has been the appearance of a number of single-author studies of sensation novelists, either in the form of monographs or edited collections. In previous decades, single-author publications on writers associated with sensation fiction tended to be confined to Wilkie Collins, whose close relationship with Dickens has been a significant factor in his pre-eminence within the genre. Despite a seeming lull in critical interest in Collins in the early twenty-first century, the field has more recently regained

momentum, signalled in part by the relaunch of the Wilkie Collins Journal in online form and recent Collins-themed study days and conferences.² Collins's fiction has always proved a fruitful source for critics interested in Victorian psychology and medicine, and this emphasis on sensationalism's engagement with science has informed a number of recent works. Indeed, Jenny Bourne Taylor's seminal study, In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology, first published by Routledge in 1988, has recently been reprinted in a new edition by Victorian Secrets. Two monographs of 2009 and 2011 respectively, build on Taylor's earlier work on Collins's negotiation of contemporary medical ideas. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas's Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic (2009) analyzes an impressive array of Collins's novels through the lens of contemporary medical ideas. Her argument that Collins uses gothic tropes to explore modern ideas of pathology, degeneration, madness, and criminality are skillfully supported through a discussion of the work of nineteenth-century physicians, psychiatrists, scientists, and theological debates, synthesized with detailed close-readings of the novels. Talairach-Vielmas convincingly demonstrates how modern medical ideas are at the center of many of Collins's texts, and she offers an intriguing argument about the displacement of the supernatural in sensation novels, which is replaced by the far more frightening menace of the medical.

Laurie Garrison's Science, Sexuality, and Sensation Novels: Pleasures of the Senses (2011) is not a single author study, but it devotes significant space to Collins's fiction, along with that of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, Rhoda Broughton, and Dickens. Garrison claims to shift the focus of earlier studies by critics such as Sally Shuttleworth, Jenny Bourne Taylor, and Andrew Mangham, from the psychological effects of sensation fiction to the physiological effects on their readers. This is not always a convincing claim, since arguably the psychological and the physiological are closely interconnected, both in the novels

themselves and in the medical and scientific literature on which Garrison draws. She argues that sensation fiction “inspired a new form of reading, one that depended first on the physical effects it inspired in the reader and secondly on the psychological effects that occurred as a result of this form of reading” (xii). In following this line of enquiry, Garrison builds on the work of authors such as D. A. Miller, whose Foucauldian-orientated The Novel and the Police (1989) similarly analysed the physiological response to sensation novels. There are also continuities and contiguities with Nicholas Daly’s work on the genre in relation to modernity and his arguments regarding the new sense of physical and temporal rapidity experienced by the mid-Victorians (Daly 2004). Developing the ideas of these earlier studies and applying them to a wider range of sensation novels, Garrison offers interesting discussions of mesmerism and spiritualism and some insightful close-reading of her chosen texts.

If Collins’s fiction has been a productive source for scholars interested in the history of medicine and science, it has also proved to be of interest to postmodernist and deconstructionist critics. Back in 1988, Jennie Bourne Taylor posited that Collins demands to be read as a “modern” (even postmodern) writer, whose “self-reflexive” novels are marked by the postmodern qualities of “play, doubling and duplicity” (1). Sundeep Bisla’s 2013 Derridean study, Wilkie Collins and Copyright: Artistic Ownership in the Age of the Borderless Word, similarly sees Collins’s work as self-reflexive, arguing that he is a writer with an awareness of linguistic paradoxes, of the “iterability” of the written word. Bisla examines Collins’s interventions in contemporary debates over copyright and suggests that these concerns implicitly shaped his narratives, leading to an increasingly “recursive self-reflexivity” in each of his most famous novels of the 1860s.

Since 2008, Mariaconcetta Costantini has published no less than three books which deal solely or significantly with Collins. Her 2008 monograph, Venturing into Unknown

Waters: Wilkie Collins and the Challenge of Modernity, situates Collins and his fiction within the shifting intellectual milieu of Victorian society. As “a man who responded with enthusiasm to the cultural stimuli of his environment” (13). Collins, Costantini argues, perceived the “pluralism of experience and the ‘fluidity’ of human identity,” making him an archetypally “modern” writer (13). Her impressively rich study reads Collins’s fiction through and against the key scientific, political, economic, cultural, and philosophical thinkers of the mid-Victorian period.

In 2009, Costantini edited a volume devoted entirely to essays on the Collins novel that one contemporary reviewer described as a “lurid labyrinth of improbabilities” (“Review of Armada”). Armada: Wilkie Collins and the Dark Threads of Life includes sixteen separate chapters which focus on different aspects of this enthralling novel and its fascinating anti-heroine, Lydia Gwilt. Costantini’s most recent monograph develops the work in her chapter on the professional classes for the Blackwell Companion to Sensation Fiction. In Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel (2015), she argues that Collins, Braddon, Wood, and Reade self-reflexively engage with emerging new constructions of the professional in their fiction, during a period when professionalism (in various fields, including authorship) was being redefined and theorized. One of the strengths of Costantini’s meticulously researched study is the balance of texts discussed, which include well-known novels of the genre as well as several (especially by Reade and Wood), which deserve more critical attention. Costantini’s theoretically-inflected and astute textual analysis brings new insights, both about the nature of sensation fiction and the cultural milieu within which it was situated.

In 2010, the late Richard Fantina’s monograph, Victorian Sensational Fiction: The Daring Work of Charles Reade was the first significant study of Reade’s fiction and drama to be published since Elton E. Smith’s monograph for Twayne’s English Authors Series in

1976. Viewed in his own time as an important novelist, even a genius, Reade was almost forgotten for most of the twentieth century, and seen as a minor popular writer whose reputation rested on his one historical novel, The Cloister and the Hearth. With the resurgence of interest in sensation fiction, Reade was to a degree recovered, but his prominence in studies of the sensation novel has been negligible, compared to the interest shown in either Collins or Braddon, and little has actually been written about his fiction. Fantina's study offers an important corrective to this neglect and he makes a persuasive case for Reade's importance, not least for his complex and often radical stance on social questions of his time. As Fantina argues, "Reade's work expands the epistemological horizons of his era" (4). This timely book presents Reade as a figure meriting much more critical attention, not only for his adversarial stance on questions of social power and gender (if not on race, as Fantina is reluctantly forced to acknowledge), but also as a writer whose work sold in the hundreds of thousands in its own day.

Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture (2013), edited by Jane Jordan and Andrew King, finally provides the overdue critical attention this intriguing novelist deserves. With contributions from leading scholars, the volume is organized into three sections: Rereading Ouida, Rewriting Ouida, and Ouida and Politics. Each of the essays highlight the complexity of this colourful and controversial figure, the relationship of her work to other female writers of the fin de siècle, such as Marie Corelli and Vernon Lee, and her position on political issues, nationalism, and Aesthetics. Overall, the book makes a compelling case for the importance of Ouida in the shifting cultural and literary landscape of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Yet it is undoubtedly Braddon who has received the preponderance of attention in recent years, and she is arguably one of the most successfully "recovered" female popular novelists of the Victorian period. Since renewed interest in her fiction began during the

1970s, she has increasingly become a regular name on conference programmes, a focus for academic publications, and a presence on the university curriculum. Twenty-first-century publications have reflected this repositioning of Braddon within the field of Victorian Studies, beginning with the now seminal edited collection by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie, Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context (2000), which paved the way for subsequent scholarship by moving beyond the narrow sphere of sensation fiction, and the even narrower context of Braddon's most famous novel, Lady Audley's Secret (1862). In addition to recent monographs by Natalie and Ronald Schroeder (From Sensation to Society: Representations of Marriage in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon 1862-1866 2006), Beth Palmer, Alberto Gabriele, and Laurie Garrison, all of which devote total or significant space to consideration of Braddon as both author and editor, there has been a recent collection of essays edited by Jessica Cox, New Perspectives on Mary Elizabeth Braddon (2012), Saverio Tomaiuolo's monograph, In Lady Audley's Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Genres (2010), my own Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction (2012), and countless journal articles. As noted above, Braddon also features prominently in both The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction and Blackwell's A Companion to Sensation Fiction.

Tomaiuolo's In Lady Audley's Shadow continues the project of reclaiming Braddon's wider oeuvre as a legitimate area of interest, and it is the first full-length critical study to range beyond the better-known fiction of the 1860s. Tomaiuolo's primary focus is on Braddon's engagement with literary genres, positing her sensational bestseller, Lady Audley's Secret, as the paradigmatic work, which ineluctably shaped and determined her subsequent career. As Tomaiuolo writes:

The biographical, parabiographical and narrative paradigmatic value of Lady Audley's Secret explains its centrality in Braddon's literary macrotext and motivates her continuous attempt to

cope with the enormous impact of this novel on the Victorian literary public. Far from being her masterpiece, Braddon's novel remains in fact an indisputable reference point for understanding her nature as a writer. (14)

Of course, the impetus to move beyond Lady Audley's Secret has been evident for a long time in Braddon studies, but one of the obstacles remains the reluctance of publishers to take a risk on works that are not taught widely on university syllabi. Tomaiuolo makes the best of both worlds by taking Lady Audley's Secret as his launching point for a consideration of Braddon's wider opus and its engagement with literary genres beyond sensation fiction. A strength of the study is the way in which it liberates Braddon from the critical cul-de-sac of sensationalism in which she was so long confined, and offers nuanced and contextualized readings of her engagement with a number of key Victorian literary genres, such as gothic, detective fiction, and realism. In doing so, Tomaiuolo also draws attention to Braddon's essential generic hybridity, whereby several generic categories and their respective tropes are often present within one work.

Jessica Cox's edited collection on Braddon similarly makes concessions to the enduring focus on Lady Audley's Secret, while also providing coverage of the writer's wider work. The book is divided into two sections, with the first offering four essays on Braddon's most famous bestseller. In the second section, individual chapters examine a range of Braddon's fiction, from her first novel The Trail of the Serpent, through to late fiction from the 1890s and into the twentieth century. Contributions from Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, Kate Mattacks, and Carla E. Coleman offer refreshing new perspectives on late novels such as the excellent Thou Art the Man (1894), the detective novel, His Darling Sin (1899), and the heavily autobiographical A Lost Eden (1904), all of which afford an opportune reminder that Braddon remained a significant and commercially successful writer throughout the fin de siècle and up until her death in 1915.

Despite the continuing habit of seeing Wood, along with Collins and Braddon, as a primary proponent of the genre, she has yet to receive the same levels of attention as her rivals. However, despite the absence to date of a monograph or edited collection devoted to Wood, there has been a steady flow of interesting work. In 2008, Andrew Maunder and Emma Liggins co-edited a special issue of Women's Writing on Wood and, more recently, there have been several interesting essays which focus on her work beyond the famous East Lynne. Janice M. Allan's excellent article for Critical Survey (2011) takes as its focus Wood's 1857 serial for the New Monthly Magazine, Parkwater, and seeks to undermine the widespread perception of Wood as a conservative and "safe" sensation novelist, compared to her supposedly more radical rivals, Collins and Braddon. Allan demonstrates that Wood self-consciously engages with current events (such as the murder trial of Madeleine Smith in 1857) and the emergent commodity culture, enabling her to explore anxieties around duplicitous femininity. Allan's reading of Parkwater also highlights the frequently graphic nature of Wood's depictions of violence, an aspect of the novelist's writing (particularly in her serials of the 1850s), which is seldom acknowledged.

Similar levels of graphic violence are evident in Wood's St. Martin's Eve (which also initially appeared as a serial in the New Monthly), and it is this novel that provides the focus for Tara MacDonald's examination of the "gossip economy" in Wood's fiction. "'She'd give her two ears to know': The Gossip Economy in Ellen Wood's St. Martin's Eve," is one of twelve essays included in Economic Women: Essays in Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture edited by Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport (2013). MacDonald's contribution argues that gossip in Victorian novels constitutes its own economy, and a specifically female one. MacDonald offers a nuanced argument about the gendered economy of gossip, private information, and reputation, which she links persuasively to the authorial persona that Wood deliberately cultivates.

Anyone familiar with Wood's novels would concur that money and morality are central elements of her plots. While MacDonald focuses on the former, Julie Bizzotti's article, "Sensational Sermonizing: Ellen Wood, Good Words, and the Conversion of the Popular," approaches its subject through religion. Bizzotti examines Wood's 1864 novel Oswald Cray, in the context of its serialization in the religious periodical, Good Words. Through a discussion of the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, she makes an interesting argument about new methods of synthesizing the religious and secular in the period, as a new way of stimulating religious sentiment.

With the launch in 2016 of the new series, "Key Popular Women Writers," edited by Helena Ifill and Janine Hatter for Edward Everett Root Publishers, the single-author studies which will make up the series look certain to increase in number, and Wood (as one of the projected first volumes) is set to receive more detailed treatment. The series aims to publish new feminist criticism on women writers who were widely read in the Victorian period, but have subsequently been marginalized; already in the pipeline are planned monographs on Wood, Braddon, Broughton, Corelli, Marryat, Charlotte Riddell, and Amelia B. Edwards.

If recent work has been typified by the impulse to go beyond the small cluster of better-known sensation novelists, it has also demonstrated an inclination to go beyond the geographical borders of Victorian Britain itself. Two recent books exemplify this direction, exploring the impact and nature of sensation fiction in its international contexts. Transatlantic Sensations, edited by Jennifer Phegley, John Cyril Barton, and Kristin N. Huston (2012), examines a range of authors from both sides of the Atlantic, in order to highlight the symbiotic relationship of sensation fiction produced in Britain and America and to investigate "the transatlantic intersections, commerce, and exchange between these two literary traditions" (Phegley 16). This undertaking proves to be a productive one, which enables a redefinition of the field of sensation literature in terms of its perceived temporal

parameters, its relationship to other popular genres, and the reciprocal nature of the British and American traditions, which, as Phegley and Barton point out in their introduction, “defies traditional conceptions of a one-way flow of cultural influence from the ‘old world’ to the ‘new’” (16).

Susan Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi similarly argue the benefits of viewing sensationalism in its international contexts in their Sensational Melbourne: Reading, Sensation Fiction and Lady Audley’s Secret in the Victorian Metropolis (2011). In this original and intriguing study, Martin and Mirmohamadi trace the immense popularity of sensation fiction in mid-nineteenth-century colonial Australia and, more specifically, in the rapidly modernizing city of Melbourne. By taking Braddon’s phenomenal bestseller, Lady Audley’s Secret, and mapping its reception and consumption in the Australian context, the authors highlight how the novel’s themes and preoccupation with modernity appealed to readers in Melbourne, “an environment in which rapid economic and social change was fuelled by the discovery of gold, and advances in technology and communication” (Martin 9).

Sensation fiction’s insistent engagement with modernity has proved a fruitful area for criticism in recent years. In Writing the Past, Writing the Future: Time and Narrative in Gothic and Sensation Fiction (2009), Richard S. Albright draws on the philosophical work of Paul Ricoeur (particularly Time and Narrative), Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism, and writings from Edmund Burke to Charles Darwin, to read popular fiction from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as revealing “anxieties about the changing perceptions of time” through their various discourses of temporality (17). Albright’s book focuses on the period between 1794 and 1862, which necessarily limits the range of sensation novels discussed. This is the only real weakness of an otherwise fascinating study. The analysis of the rather obvious choices of The Woman in White, Lady Audley’s Secret, and East Lynne through the lens of contemporary anxieties about time does offer convincing new insights about the

sensational narrative strategies of Collins, Braddon, and Wood. However, the decision to discuss all three novels in a single chapter – whereas the earlier gothic novels were granted more space and consideration – means that the full potential of Albright’s argument is unable to emerge, in relation to the sensation genre at least.

A disappointingly predictable choice of texts also marks Elizabeth Steere’s 2013 The Female Servant and Sensation Fiction: Kitchen Literature, which, as its title indicates, focuses on the centrality of class in sensation novels and, in particular, the role of servants. Steere examines contemporary anxieties regarding cross-class reading habits, an issue which has received substantial attention in the existing body of scholarship on the genre, which makes Steere’s claim that her focus on the female servant “will yield previously unexplored trends in the genre” (3) a slightly dubious one. The decision to focus on the representation of female servants when, as Steere herself admits, male servants are significant characters in sensation fiction rests on the author’s argument that female servants are able to traverse the boundaries of class, family, and society more effectively than their male counterparts. The subsequent readings of key novels support these claims and reveal some intriguing insights about the fluidity of class boundaries and the narrative tensions these provoke. My only real criticism of what is otherwise a useful addition to the growing body of scholarship on sensation fiction is that the choice of novels discussed is rather narrow, and omits some that would have provided fertile ground for this kind of analysis: Collins’s No Name and Braddon’s Aurora Floyd particularly come to mind. Steere does indeed open up the debate to some extent by making a case for seeing earlier novels such as Jane Eyre and other texts by perceived realist writers (such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Grey Woman”) as part of the sensation continuum, which she sees as culminating in the contemporary neo-Victorian novels of Sarah Waters. However, although the readings of East Lynne, Lady Audley’s Secret, and The Moonstone offer new ideas and insights, there was arguably scope to move

beyond these “usual suspects” and explore the rich terrain of mid-nineteenth-century sensationalism that remains under-examined.

Steere’s inclusion of Gaskell and the Brontës in her book about the sensation novel is characteristic of the final trend that I will consider in this review: that is, the way in which the discussion of sensation fiction is increasingly taking place alongside criticism of more established canonical texts and authors. This is arguably a sign that sensation fiction studies have reached maturity and attained a “respectability” that was not always the case. It is no longer seen to be necessary to justify the academic study of a branch of the novel that many Victorians themselves viewed as ephemeral and sub-literary, or to discuss such texts in isolation. Increasingly, scholars are integrating the study of sensation fiction into studies of the Victorian novel more generally. A recent example is Phillip Mallett’s edited collection, The Victorian Novel and Masculinity (2015), which explores its topic throughout the range of Victorian fiction, including essays on the sensation novel (e.g., East Lynne, Aurora Floyd), alongside and in dialogue with the texts of canonical writers such as Eliot, Hardy, and Conrad. In a similar way, Maia McAleavey’s The Bigamy Plot (2015) wilfully cuts across the traditional boundaries of the canonical and the popular to discuss the significance of bigamy to a series of Victorian novels. Henry Mansel had of course identified the “bigamy novel” as a distinct sub-grouping of the sensation novel in his now famous 1863 review of the phenomenon. McAleavey, however, demonstrates the persistence of the trope across the generic range of Victorian fiction, once again emphasizing the artificiality to a great extent of the supposed rigid demarcation between realist and sensationalist forms in the period.

This boundary is a central focus of Richard Nemesvari’s Thomas Hardy, Sensationalism, and the Melodramatic Mode (2011), a study that deconstructs the assumed dichotomy between sensation fiction and realism through an analysis of Hardy’s deployment of both modes within his novels. Hardy has long stood on the periphery of the sensation

debate, being viewed generally as a novelist of a quite different quality and style to the popular authors with whom the sensation novel is generally associated. Hardy is usually linked to discussions of the genre on the grounds of a single early and allegedly uncharacteristic novel, Desperate Remedies (1871), which has traditionally been treated as something of an embarrassment and seen variously as a false start, a convenient means of breaking into print, or a regrettable mistake in discerning his own true forte as a novelist. However, as Nemesvari's book testifies, Hardy's relationship to sensationalism is more complex than such explanations would suggest, and Desperate Remedies is not unique in its employment of sensational literary strategies. By taking as his subject a major figure like Hardy, Nemesvari provocatively implies the ways in which sensationalism was, in many ways, central to Victorian literary culture as a whole.

Despite the wealth of scholarship on sensation fiction, which I have only touched on within this essay, there remain under-explored avenues of enquiry. For instance, the precise nature of the relationship between penny fiction and the middle-brow sensation novel has yet to be fully examined. Braddon, once again, is a key figure here, being unusual in writing for both markets. Similarly, the distinctions of generic classification within the Victorian novel, which are being increasingly questioned and rethought, can only benefit from further work on the as yet uncharted territory of the large body of neglected popular fiction. The second phase of recovery that I have identified as a current trend has the potential to bring valuable insights into our understanding of the wider field of Victorian literature, and the ways in which its different genres and formats shaped and influenced one another. For in spite of the questions such recovery poses in terms of our theorizing of literary value, the popular, and of the processes of canonicity, it also enables a fuller understanding of the dynamics at work in the nineteenth-century literary field – in terms of networks, influence, publishing practices, commerciality, and readerships.

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Notes

1. “Beyond Braddon: Reassessing Female Sensationalists,” in Women’s Writing 20.2 (May 2013), was republished as a book, with minor revisions to the introduction, by Routledge in 2014 as Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers. See “Works Considered” for details.

2. For example, the Victorian Popular Fiction Association organized a Wilkie Collins Study Day at Senate House, London, on 16 September 2013. Another event was the conference “The ‘Heart’ and ‘Science’ of Wilkie Collins and his Contemporaries” held at Barts Pathology Museum, London, on 24 September 2016.

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