

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Special Issue:

Gender in Victorian Popular Fiction, Art, and Culture

Guest Edited by Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill

### **Gender in Victorian Popular Fiction, Art, and Culture**

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<1>Issues of gender are at the heart of popular culture studies. To offer just one of many examples, the extent to which heroines such as Joss Whedon’s Buffy Summers and Stephanie Meyer’s Bella Swan can be seen as role models for young women, and the type of message they may be conveying to their viewers and readers, continues to generate much critical interest (see Jarvis, Levine and Parks). More recently, shows like *Transparent* (which, at the time of writing, has won numerous awards) have led to much discussion in the popular press about the representation of trans people in the media and what they might teach viewers (both trans and cis). This suggests that discussions about the depiction of gender in popular culture, and how it may influence the public conception of gender, will only continue to become more complex and pressing.

<2>These issues were equally pertinent in the nineteenth century. As Walter Besant argues, popular fiction “may be considered as a great educational power. As dealing with different aspects of life, it teaches the nature of the world we live in” (49). This statement is a defense of sensation novels, which, as it was published in M. E. Braddon’s own periodical, *Belgravia*, is hardly free from bias, but it does illustrate a key point: popular fiction educates. Through its choice of subject matter, characterization, narrative voice and plots—particularly endings that seem to reward or punish certain types of behavior—popular fiction can teach its readers about what is and is not acceptable, admirable, and to be aspired to. Popular fiction can also affect readers’ opinions on matters of genre, class, race, age, and of course gender. This is true of many genres, not only popular ones, but Victorian reviewers were often most critical of the moral (as well as the literary) quality of popular fiction (as demonstrated in Brooke Fortune’s article on Newgate fiction), and so its ability to influence its readers became a cause for concern, especially because popular fiction was *popular*—read by large numbers of people from different levels and corners of society, numbers so large, and groups so disparate, that their reading, and responses to that reading, could not be effectively controlled or monitored. While

the middle classes had Mudie's circulating library, which at least acted as a moral censor through its power to boost or limit a novel's circulation (see Roberts 10-12), there was still concern that unregulated reading was occurring on a massive scale amongst the progressively empowered working classes, and the rapidly growing, and increasingly dominant middle classes. This special issue addresses these themes by interrogating the multiple ways in which instruction about gender roles, and how to perform them, was disseminated not through the classroom, but within Victorian popular fiction.

<3>Concerns about how gender roles were portrayed in popular fiction, and what messages readers might be taking from the texts they read, were often at the heart of attacks on popular fiction. Sensation fiction, the scandalous genre that depicted adultery, fraud, murder and other bad behavior in the supposedly respectable domestic sphere, attracted some of the most heated criticism, especially in its portrayal of morally questionable (or downright immoral) women. Margaret Oliphant, for example, was particularly concerned that in sensation novels an "appreciation of flesh and blood" and an "eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls" (259). Critical appraisals of Victorian popular fiction in the last three decades have equally focused on this genre and its depiction of gender. The early work of academics such as P. D. Edwards, Lyn Pykett, and Sally Shuttleworth fore-grounded the rebellious elements in work by sensation novelists such as Wilkie Collins, M. E. Braddon and Ellen Wood, that undermined essentialist conceptions of female identity, while more recent analyses by Solveig Robinson and Jennifer Phegley have demonstrated how sensation fiction works to foster perceptive and independent reading habits in female readerships, as well as challenge rigid societal constructs of "the hero" and his representation.

<4>While sensation fiction studies remain vigorous, there is much more work to be done beyond this "flagship" popular genre. The articles in this issue—that notably do not directly cover the 1860s, the heyday of the sensation novel—show the wide range of popular genres now receiving critical attention, including the Newgate novel, children's literature and speculative fiction. It also covers a range of popular formats, including novels, periodical fiction and illustrations, and popular authors with very different styles, writing careers, and agendas, from Harrison Ainsworth, through Eleanor Grace O'Reilly, to Eliza Lynn Linton. As the following articles demonstrate, popular fiction was often intimately concerned with presenting gender roles in such a way as to encourage or dissuade emulation, but the ways in which this was achieved, and the extent to which those roles were conservatively or subversively portrayed varied hugely. Often, those genres that caused the most scandal at the time of publication actually present a rather conventional conception of gender, while genres that were ostensibly didactic could carry radical models of femininity and masculinity.

<5>Although the Newgate Novel of the early 1830s was perceived as a potentially corruptive influence on young readers, Philippa Abbott demonstrates that the depiction of female characters was largely conservative and reflected the "authors' contemporary society for which 'proper' femininity was especially associated with innocent passivity." Abbott demonstrates how, during the 1830s, there was a gradual inclusion of female criminals in Newgate fiction, and how these characters, and the novels in which they appeared, were simultaneously "bound

to middle-class conventions of femininity” and “unsettled by the agency and energy of the criminal female.” As real life cases of female criminals showed a public willingness to sympathize with the female criminal, this “allowed writers to explore the possibility that women could be criminal, feminine, and sympathetic at the same time.” As a result, Abbott reveals that it was not how close a female character came to criminality that would win or lose her sympathy, but the extent to which she managed to conform to Victorian ideals of femininity.

<6>Whereas Abbott traces the development of the early Newgate Novels, Brooke Fortune focuses on arguably the most famous title: *Jack Sheppard* (1839). Although the male characters have traditionally received more critical attention than the female, Fortune notes that “the novel has not been approached through the lens of the boyhood narrative.” Fortune situates the characterization of Jack within developing notions of boyhood, and argues that Ainsworth is in fact anticipating the late nineteenth-century figure of the eternal boy. As an imperial figure of the *fin de siècle*, the eternal boy was not required to grow up because an “inherent childishness,” which was motivated by “play-ethic” and “competition,” was desirable in “young men sent out to enact the empire’s dirty work.” Fortune reveals how a similar mind set serves Jack well in his successful criminal career. In this way, *Jack Sheppard* forms a contrast to mid-century boyhood narratives that were influenced by the tenets of Muscular Christianity and “portrayed boyhood as an important, but transient, stage on the journey to manly maturation.” In fact, Fortune’s analytical contrasting of Jack’s ability to survive in the “sinister playground” of eighteenth-century London, with Thames Darrell’s honourable but ineffective embodiment of Muscular Christianity, demonstrates one of the reasons why middle-class critics feared that *Jack Sheppard* could encourage criminal (or eternal boyish) behaviour in young male readers.

<7>Mary Clai Jones’s contribution forms an interesting point of comparison with Fortune’s article about boyhood narratives. Where *Jack Sheppard* offers an alternative to the model of boyhood portrayed in most mid-nineteenth century boys’ stories, Jones shows how Eleanor Grace O’Reilly’s novel, *Doll World; Or Play and Earnest: A Study from Real Life* (1872), also resists the traditional didactic drive of popular Victorian fiction, but this time through female-centered doll stories that prepared young girls for their future lives as wives and mothers, molding them “into exemplary middle-class women.” Drawing upon frontispieces, reviews and a close reading of the novel, Jones argues that O’Reilly’s heroine, Birdie, utilizes her doll to access play spaces outside traditional domestic and supervised grounds. In doing so, O’Reilly develops the female reader’s sense of agency, imaginative life, and freedom, while—in line with an emerging re-conception of girlhood in the Victorian period—maintaining “girlhood as a sacred time and space for women.” Jones postulates that unlike many examples of the popular genre of doll stories, this novel educated O’Reilly’s girl readers in how to cherish the freedom of childhood play, as well as the memories and female bonds that such a time creates. *Doll World* therefore ultimately points the way to a more progressive model of womanhood.

<8>While children’s popular fiction often attempted to influence the kind of men and women their readers would become, other popular genres worked to demonstrate appropriate behavior to their adult readers. Adult fiction was concerned with offering, preparing, and

regulating its readers for adult life through a variety of genres. This special issue's definition of the "popular" takes on new dimensions with Flore Janssen's article on street harassment in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and periodical writings of Eliza Lynn Linton. By considering the popular press's debates on street harassment as experienced by women, to which Lynn Linton contributed in the 1860s, and its previous depictions in Gaskell's 1840-50s fiction, Janssen argues the debate was representative of larger social anxieties, particularly shifting class and gender roles in the precarious environment of urban and industrial mid-Victorian Britain. Janssen postulates that while both Gaskell and Lynn Linton recognize street harassment as a reality for working and middle-class women, neither see the predicament from the victim's perspective, nor recognize the harasser's behavior as problematic; instead both writers analyze its causes and consequences in terms of their own social agenda. Their agendas address the increasing ways in which women were controlled in the public sphere, whether through undermining women's work by harassing them in the workplace, or by blaming their experiences of harassment on their dress and behavior. Thus, albeit in different ways, Gaskell and Lynn Linton sought to educate their readers on how to navigate women's increasing occupation of public spaces to the benefit of both men and women, and the different classes.

<9>The final two articles center on late-Victorian fiction, and while they also offer models of gender for their readers, they also more directly address the actual education of women, and men's responses to it. Erin Louttit's article on gender inequality and women's education in Alice Mangold Diehl's *Dr. Paull's Theory* (1893), discusses how popular novels of the *fin de siècle* were still engaging with the themes of women's education, marriage and emancipation. By combining the realist theme of courtship with the supernatural plot device of reincarnation, Mangold Diehl expertly critiques how women's situations within society were not making significant improvements over the generations. Louttit draws upon Mangold Diehl's life, educational reformers and contemporaneous reviews of the novel to demonstrate how her female characters are courageous and hardworking, but have difficulty in finding appropriate employment, or suitable marriages. As a strong advocate of women's education herself, Louttit argues, Mangold Diehl wrote this fictional plea for both women and men's greater educational, intellectual and economic equality in order to achieve both domestic and vocational harmony.

<10>Susan Hroncek, contrastingly, explores two speculative fiction novels that have a more ambivalent attitude towards female learning, particularly scientific knowledge. In George Griffith's *Olga Romanoff* (1894) and T. Mullett Ellis's *Zalma* (1895), female characters threaten the existence of humanity through revengeful over-reaching and use of chemical weaponry, much in the tradition of the male mad scientist. While the female scientists are clearly formidable threats, they are also repeatedly referred to within the texts as witches and sorcerers, undermining their learning and practical abilities. While the other articles in this issue may offer advice and guidance for readers inhabiting (or destined for) particular gender roles, Hroncek shows how this *fin-de-siècle* fiction actually acts as a warning for those who overlook the reality, and efficacy, of women's scientific capacities, not only for global destruction in the future, but for progress in the present.

<11>Overall, where once the supposed synonymy of “popular” with “lowbrow” and “unintellectual” meant that a popular text could be dismissed as unworthy of study, popular fiction studies has taken great leaps forward in illustrating what one can learn from such works, opening up new avenues of exploration. Scholars no longer feel the need to justify the study of popular literature, and popular genres are increasingly studied at universities and in schools: *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and *The Moonstone* (1868) are now on the British A-Level syllabus (Holt). In discourse surrounding both gender and genre, notions of legitimacy, validity and value abound, and our special issue investigates and elucidates the connections between them, while paving the way for future scholarship in these areas.

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