

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Gore, Clare Walker. *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 260 pgs.

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<1>Clare Walker Gore's crisp study of Victorian novelistic plots joins recent scholarship in Victorian disability studies interested in disability's relationship to literary form: Karen Bourrier's *The Measure of Manliness: Disability and Masculinity in Mid-Victorian Fiction* (University of Michigan Press, 2015), Heidi Logan's *Sensational Deviance: Disability in Nineteenth-Century Sensation Fiction* (Routledge, 2018) Kylee-Anne Hingston's *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2019). As Gore describes of her project's formalist methodology informed by disability theory, *Plotting Disability* sketches out a literary history of disability's characterization in the Victorian novel in terms of plots with identifiable conventions and tropes. By refusing the conflation between character and actual disabled lived experience, Gore theorizes disability in terms of its figuration within novels: "To be a disabled character might, in other words, mean being disabled *as* a character" (3). Gore provides a critical framework that deemphasizes disability as a stable subjectivity inherent to disabled bodyminds and instead reads disabled characters as being disabled by novelists to interrogate the shared formations of other identity categories like gender and class. For Gore, what is most fascinating about the Victorian novel is the "astonishing variety of narrative work" that disabled characters perform yet elude critical attention because of their marginality in terms of the novel's plot (3). Far from incapable, disabled characters in the Victorian novel do the essential work of genre.

<2>Gore's attention to the way disabled characters are plotted within the scheme of novels or realized through plot revises the history of the nineteenth-century novel by recentering disability as crucial to the novel's formation. *Plotting Disability* takes seriously how genre differences between realist novels and sensation fiction, for example, complicates seemingly obvious one-to-one conflations of a character's social and narrative identities. Gore gets around her book's lack of emphasis on the lived experience of Victorian disabled people by making a strong case for how observing the "differences between various fictional constructions of disability in particular historical moments" provides a necessary corrective to the presentist bent of much of disability studies that needs to attend more carefully to the forms disability take in history, particularly literary and cultural forms. According to Gore, disability's ambivalences and paradoxes in Victorian plots emblemize what disability activists and scholars have called the social model of disability, which emphasizes that disability is the product of inaccessible environments and cultures rather than a lack or flaw reducible to individual bodies in need of correction. Disabled characters in these novels are hardly anomalies but pervasive figures that signal the contested nature of disability as a category and experience over the course of the nineteenth century. Despite disability's centrality to the development of the nineteenth-century novel, it is ableism,

Gore suggests, that motivated much of the exclusion of sentimental and sensation fiction from the Victorian canon.

<3>*Plotting Disability* is structured as a series of case studies the each feature a different canonical writer's engagement with a popular novelistic genre, ranging from Dickensian melodrama to Jamesian realism. Gore's close readings situate disabled literary characters in terms of their "generic affiliation," a critical move that avoids the typical pitfall of retrospective diagnosis or simply pointing out a character's disability by unpacking how disability is constituted by the novel's formal conventions that delineate a series of readerly expectations and plotlines (4). What makes Victorian novels so crip is their self-consciousness about such expectations and their play with these expectations like Olive Rothesay in Dinah Craik's *Olive*, which cripps the genre of the female *bildungsroman* by having her "deformity" shape her identity formation as a woman. In contrast, the "sidelining" of disabled characters like Phineas Fletcher in Craik's later *John Halifax, Gentleman*, interrogates the marriage plot's hetero-ableist assumptions precisely because Phineas' minor position positions him as a uniquely crip foil to John. Disability not only disrupts Victorian plots but puts their presumed linearity and soundness into question *as fictions*. As Gore demonstrates, the other aspect of this crip self-consciousness of much of Victorian fiction is the way many genres responded to one another's deployment of disability toward entirely different ends. The story of Victorian novel's development, in other words, was a series of negotiations about disability's place.

<4>Both Gore's discussion of Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* and her chapter on Dinah Craik and Charlotte Yonge parse just how much gender and disability become imbricated in Victorian fiction. Because these novels frequently represent disability as the foundations for embodied knowledge that then empowers these women to change the forms of social relation relegated to them, Gore argues that disabled female characters in sentimental domestic fiction challenge the ableist and sexist cultural coding of disability as feminine or femininity as incapacity. Gore's careful tracking of the linguistic slippages between the multiple terms used for disability in this period like "incapacity," "deformity," "affliction" reveal not only how disability gets flattened into gender and vice versa but also how these novels progressively demonstrate disabled womanhood as capable of thriving and even pleasure. Gender and disability mutually constitute one another in empowering ways that often displace disabled women characters in these novels but also unexpectedly free them from the trappings of marriage or familial expectation. Gore's literary history of disability in the novel thus complicates the otherwise standard narrative of nineteenth-century disability as always moving toward pathology and suffering. Disability in Victorian fiction is not mere identity but a shifting set of affects, moods, characterizations, points of view, and plots in dialogue and in tension.

<5>Gore's multi-genre analysis of Victorian fiction underscores that "the sheer variety of this narrative work, the sheer range of meaning that these bodies are made to bear, does not add up to one, 'Victorian' way of seeing disability" (236). The crip project of *Plotting Disability* is its recovery of the multiple Victorian disabilities persistently reimaged through the novel form against any singular notion of Victorian disability reducible to a character type. Gore's book explores these disabilities on their own literary terms without imposing theoretical frameworks upon their idiosyncratic manifestations in Victorian novels. *Plotting Disability* offers us a reading method for novelistic representations of disability that embraces their strangeness, their

marginality, their excesses. What emerges is a crip formalism that undoes the enduring ableism of how Victorian scholars have talked about the novel and about disability in the nineteenth century.