

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Sexing the Brain

Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences. Rachel Malane. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005. xiv + 229 pp.

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<1>When Harvard University president Lawrence H. Summers suggested in a speech that women's brains are not equipped to excel in mathematics and physics, he reignited a controversy that has its roots in nineteenth-century mental science: the debate over whether or not human brains are gendered. In *Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences* (2005), her published dissertation, Rachel Malane describes the ways in which three major Victorian novelists, Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins, and Thomas Hardy, explored the repercussions of an innately gendered brain. Malane's readings of several major Victorian novels through the lens of mental science is often excellent. But it is also significantly hampered by her reluctance to address the possibility of subversion in the novels' use of science, an approach that would require more nuanced treatment of the novelists' treatment of scientific discourse.

<2> Malane begins her book with a broad overview of theories about the gendered mind in the nineteenth-century sciences. Although this introductory material does not contribute much that is new, it provides an effective foundation for the original work of subsequent chapters. Malane's chapter on Charlotte Brontë's exploration of female psychology sees the novelist as depicting the female brain as more permeable, and, hence, vulnerable, than the male brain. She builds upon her overview of nineteenth-century mental sciences by showing how Brontë engages with phrenology to create a geography of the mind. Using the geographic metaphor, Malane argues that Brontë's novels reveal considerable anxiety about the vulnerability of the female brain's borders. Malane argues, for example, that *Jane Eyre* creates tension between appropriate mental porosity—such as empathy—and an utter breakdown of mental boundaries, which, she argues, is how Bertha Mason's madness is characterized. In this way, Malane makes a convincing case for the inextricability of Brontë's feminism and psychological approach to character.

<3> Malane's next chapter shows how Wilkie Collins casts the female brain as vulnerable, not, as Brontë suggests, to penetration by other minds, but to stimuli and affective responses. This, of course, makes women's psychology central to Collins's sensation fiction, a genre that, as Malane rightly observes, involves nervous reactions by its very definition. Concentrating on *The Woman in White* and *Heart and Science*, Malane argues convincingly that Collins's novels create a gendered model of the brain in which mental physiology is a major determinant of individual experience and response to experience. Malane correctly describes Collins's approach as problematic in its reducing human nature to physiology. Yet, one is left nonetheless with the desire for a reading against the grain, one that shows how Collins adapts, rather than simply adopts, Victorian mental science. That is to say, are there any subversive threads in Collins's novel that might complicate our understanding of the Victorians' relationship to mental science?

<4> Hardy's novels, Malane demonstrates in her final chapter, ground tragic love in psychobiological differences between the sexes. Reflecting and reinforcing normative Victorian gender ideology, Hardy portrays the female mind as defined by emotion, the male mind by reason. Whereas Victorian ideology tended to naturalize such gender difference as beneficially complementary, Hardy shows it as having tragic consequences. In contrast to Charlotte Brontë, who depicts the dangers of male transgression of female mental space, Hardy represents a terrible failure of communication between differently gendered minds. Unlike Collins, who is fascinated with extreme mental states and pathology, Hardy shows that even ordinary or normative mental states can produce tragedy. For Hardy, then, mental science is intertwined with narrative structure—indeed, it is often the impetus behind the novels' trajectories, in that Hardy's tragedies tend to stem from the idea that human destiny is often beyond the control of the individual's will, whether because of natural or social forces, or because of the pre-determined mental make-up of



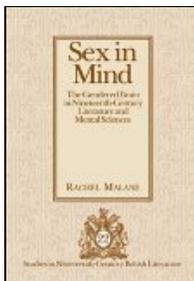
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the individual in question.

<5> Malane concludes her study with an insightful chapter in which she summarizes her findings, comparing and contrasting mental science as it is variously depicted in the novels of Brontë, Collins, and Hardy. As Malane's readings show, Victorian mental science was always heavily gendered; her use of Victorian mental science as lens through which to observe the workings of gender is extremely useful. Nonetheless, although she occasionally gestures toward the subversive uses and disruptions of mental science in these novels, Malane concludes that the literary works she studies generally reinforced normative gender roles. To be sure, there are troublingly normative elements in all of these novels; but there are also, especially in Brontë's novels, discourses that run counter to the biases of mental science—biases that include, primarily, essentialist notions about gender and mental capacity. Malane, furthermore, asserts that still other Victorian novels, including George Gissing's *The Odd Women* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, reinforce and promote the gender binaries of the era's mental science discourse. Such generalization is troubling in that it ignores the polyphony of the nineteenth-century novel, which enables competition between competing discourses. Malane's otherwise informative and compelling book is thus held back by its insistence on finding rigid parallels between Victorian novels and Victorian mental science, a drive that ignores important formal distinctions between literary and non-literary texts, and, in doing so, forecloses on the subversive potential of literature.

