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Outlandish and Sensational

Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre. Edited by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006. xxiii + 278 pp.

Outlandish English Subjects in the Victorian Domestic Novel. Timothy L. Carens. New York: Palgrave, 2005. x + 198 pp.

Reviewed by [Nicholas Birns](#), The New School

<1> In *Outlandish English Subjects in the Victorian Domestic Novel*, Timothy L. Carens argues that colonialism influenced the portrayal of domestic space in Victorian fiction, making the domestic novel a form of “autoethnography” (12) which could regard England as if it were a space of otherness. No matter how hard Britain tries to constitute the colonial as its antithesis, infiltrations and seepages occur. Discourses of the colonial cannot be sealed away from considerations of Victorian society proper.

<2> Carens opens his book with a discussion of how the social critique of novelists such as Charles Dickens, in depicting the fiscal excess of Mr. Merdle in *Little Dorrit*, “uses the figure of African fetishism to critique the over-valuation of wealth” (8). To compare English institutions to foreign idols is to borrow from the rhetoric of imperialism to expose English hypocrisy. In other words, England understands itself to be liberal on the home front, Carens argues, in contradistinction to the Orientalist distinctions it finds abroad. What denouncing Merdle as an idol demonstrates is that the English revel in their sense of superiority as free and rational, yet in fact grovel before the same sort of idols they excoriate non-Europeans as compliantly worshipping. There is nothing here necessarily about the actual worship practices of non-Westerners. It could well be the author is using stereotypes that he knows are stereotypes to demolish certain domestic complacencies. Carens mentions Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous discussion of *Little Dorrit* in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia as knowing multi-vocality provides a general basis for understanding both the polysemy and duplicity of the critique of foreign idols.

<3> Carens’s second chapter discusses the evangelical origins of blurred identities between the European and the non-European in the nineteenth century. He argues that Thomas Hardy, even in the earliest rural idylls, challenged the canons of representation in the novel by bringing to light a country life so distant from the metropole as to be virtually colonial. Emily Brontë also conflates rural and foreign through her hints at Heathcliff’s possible African origins. If English and non-European can mix so easily, Carens wonders, did this mean the Victorians believed all mankind had a common ancestor? Carens correctly notes that a literal reading of the first chapter of Genesis must reject the idea of polygenesis, that the different races of humanity are essentially different species with different origins. Yet the “curse of Canaan” argument, from Genesis 9, was popular precisely because, with its argument that the descendants of Ham (read as Africans) were cursed to slavery, it could justify racism without recourse to polygenesis.

<4> The idea of using the rhetoric of anti-idolatry to critique other cultures also has Biblical roots. Notably, its use in the Bible itself was as much intracultural as intercultural. Hebrews who did not worship idols criticized Hebrews who did; the same rhetoric was later used by English Protestants against English Catholics. Thus, in many ways, imperial distinctions are being placed into a preexisting frame of moral critique. This potential for Biblical tropes to operate outside the ossifying nineteenth-century schemata of race is, Carens argues, part of what made Evangelical groups such as the Clapham Sect potentially disruptive of colonial norms in their anti-slavery agitation. Carens’s central assertion, that evangelical morality provided a kind of proto-anthropology that unsettled rigid racial binaries, is convincing.

<5> The next chapter, on the trope of the “juggernaut” in Victorian fiction, compares the immovable comic bluster of Sir Willoughby Patterne in George Meredith’s *The Egoist* (1879) to



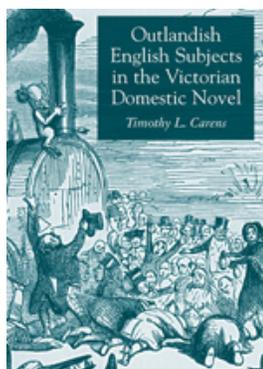
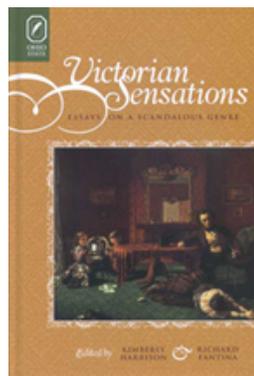
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the prodigious Hindu idol. The disestablishment of Sir Willoughby's hegemony and its replacement by a more humane and tolerant temperament is, Carens argues, importantly tinged by colonial implication. Carens states that "the language acquired Juggernaut during England's own moment of imperial power" (80), though he concedes that it was in the language well before the days that Robert Clive conquered the subcontinent for Britain in the 1750s. That words like "juggernaut" enter the English language has globalization as its sine qua non. But it seems a lexicographic as much as a substantive issue: many words have entered the English language from foreign languages. But this phenomenon is not always coincident with historical patterns of domination; for example, Nahuatl words like "tomato" and "chocolate", from precisely those areas of the globe the British did not colonize, or "camarilla," denoting political cliques in England and Germany, without any domination of the Spain where the word originated. Globalization of language was present even in Medieval Europe (where, Carens notes, "juggernaut" first appeared in English). It is not coextensive with imperialism or even colonialism. But Carens makes up for any over-arguing by a splendid bonus excursus on *Jane Eyre*, contending that Jane Eyre's earlier worship of Mr. Rochester, placing him on a pedestal that is knocked down by the end, is intended as a critique of idolatry. This has its mirror in the Christianizing mission of St. John Rivers, the suitor Jane rejects for Rochester, who goes off to evangelize India.

<6> Carens moves on to an informative and challenging reading of Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* and the relation between the international projects of philanthropy she epitomizes and the domestic reform Dickens ostensibly favors. Dickens seems to make a strict division between compassion on the domestic front and international philanthropy as represented by the settlement of Borrioboola-Gha, based on the 1841 Niger colonizing expedition, a "humanitarian" (83) venture Dickens sees as hypocritically displacing reformist energies from where they are most immediately needed. In fact the effective circle controlled by Esther's "enlightening care" (116) at the end is so small—excluding the working-class and rural England—that Carens sees it as a *de facto* retreat. Though Carens does not mention Liberia, his account of the Niger colonization will interest Americanists and students of the Black Atlantic, given that Liberia, whose colonization was similarly 'humanitarian' in origin, became independent not long before *Bleak House* was composed.

<7> The fifth chapter, on Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, demonstrates that the novel foils its own attempt to set up domestic-colonial binaries. Even the staunch Betteredge exhibits "the fanaticism of heathen religions" (126). Collins seeks to develop a domestic reverberation of colonial rhetoric that would critique elements of non-Western social organization on behalf of democratic principles. Collins re-literalizes these principles, making them more than slogans for foreign export, not to be applied back home. *The Moonstone* is, in an oblique way, a kind of Mutiny novel, registering in a sidewise manner the anxieties about governance of and potentially by Indians aroused by the 1857 rebellion. Mutiny abroad can also signal upheaval back home. More generally, Carens foregrounds Collins's "reluctance to endorse sharp distinctions between English and Indian subjectivity" (199) most obviously in the liminality and mestizaje epitomized by Ezra Jennings.

<8> Carens's final chapter is devoted to George Meredith's little-analyzed *Lord Ormont And His Aminta* (1894). Lord Ormont is a colonial grandee who, Warren Hastings or Governor Eyre-style, has trespassed the delicacies of the colonial mandate by using excessive force. Returning to England, he tries to wield power over his wife Aminta in a similarly authoritarian way. Most critics have regarded Aminta's eventual elopement with her younger and more humane lover, Matthew Weyburn, as a *Forsyte Saga*-style triumph of reformist liberalism over rigid conservatism. But Carens points out that even reformed, liberal control is still control. Aminta at the end is set up by Weyburn as the mistress of a school managed by him—and one with no female pupils. Carens links this always-reforming yet never-fully-reformed state, to more liberal theories of Indian governance that envisioned independence at some far time in the future, but relied on rhetorics of deferral to postpone this future into the asymptotic indefinite. (That Meredith, like Dickens, was pro-Governor Eyre in the controversy over the official's abuse of Jamaicans in the 1860s adds some empirical ballast to this interpretation). Carens chides critics of Meredith for not taking imperial referents sufficiently into account. His discussion of Aminta's relationship with Weyburn should be a fillip to such efforts. It also makes one wonder about limits of the supposedly liberal relationship between Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw in *Middlemarch*, or that between Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda in Eliot's novel of the latter name, if the two had ended up together.

<9> Carens has written a historically sensitive and strongly argued book. Aware that the colonial situation of, say, India and Africa are very different, he gingerly avoids any general theory of colonial tropology. Yet the idea of Christian Europe using the rhetoric of liberalism to position itself advantageously with respect to non-Christian or non-European countries may require such a theory. Indeed, this phenomenon may well go beyond colonialism, towards a larger idea of Eurocentrism or even what Jacques Derrida termed logocentrism.

<10> Whereas Carens focuses on largely canonical works, in *Victorian Sensations* Richard Fantina and Kimberly Harrison include, besides essays on *The Moonstone* and *The Woman In White*, treatments of Collins's lesser-known works and novels by Charles Reade and J. Sheridan Le Fanu in addition to the works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon. The interest in these writers has recouped for contemporary academia the centrality of the sensation novel in the twenty-first century that it had in the nineteenth-century publishing marketplace. The essays are arranged by theme, rather than author, so that Le Fanu, Collins, and Braddon show up in all three of the sections.

<11> The first part of *Victorian Sensations* canvasses the definition of the sensation novel as a "generic hybrid" (xxii). Ellen Miller Casey shows, in her analysis of the reviews of sensation novels in the *Athenaeum Weekly*, that the reviewers grudgingly conceded the entertainment values of the books even as they carefully reserved praise for the moments where the novels could be said to move toward greater realism. Richard Nemesvari then trenchantly diagnoses the sensation novel's emergence as the beginning of a split between high and low in the audience of the novel genre that foreshadowed the emergence of both 'high' modernism and 'low' genre fiction and thus the breakdown of the Victorian representational consensus. Catherine J. Golden gives support to Nemesvari's thesis as she excavates the self-referential and metafictional aspects of Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864). In another close reading of a Braddon novel, Albert C. Sears argues that *Vixen* (1879) both is conscious of and subverts the generic norms Braddon had helped establish in her earlier fiction. Dianna Vitenza discusses Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt* (1866; recently reissued by Traviata Press). Vitenza builds on Sears's argument about Braddon by arguing that Reade knowingly experimented with sensationalist devices. This interpretation of Reade sets up co-editor Fantina's treatment of this suddenly re-emergent author. In a volume where queer perspectives are otherwise under represented, Fantina argues that Reade gives serious thought to gender nonconformity. In *A Woman-Hater* (1877), Reade clearly represents a relationship that, applying later terminology, would have been described as lesbian. Fantina makes the observation that Rhoda Gale in *A Woman-Hater* is based on the well-known maverick female physician Sophia Jex-Blake, a point that could be the basis of a noteworthy monograph.

<12> Sensationalism, like the Gothic, can be seen as a reaction to science. But the very idea of sensation and sensationalism is a physical and psychological one that needed scientific language to delineate its scope. Devin Zuber's essay on the Swedenborgian aspects of *Uncle Silas* conveniently crystallizes the discourses of science, imagination, and the paranormal, far more in dialogue in the Victorian era than they later became. Tamar Heller (whose absence from a collection like this would be unimaginable) starts off the section on gender by analyzing "disembodied embodiment" (99) in the fiction of Le Fanu's niece, Rhoda Broughton. Heller sketches Broughton's representation of women's bodies as both corporeal and pneumatic, ethereal and concrete, in a way that enacts a "protofeminist somatophobia" (98) whose liberating energies are constrained by its half-capitulation to gender stereotypes. Galia Ofek writes on a specific aspect of the body-hair-usefully cataloguing the hair color of many Victorian heroines. Ofek reframes the hair question out of romance-style Rowena-and-Rebecca contrast by demonstrating how sensation novelists unhinged the connection between golden or blonde hair and normative purity. In doing so, she shows the contribution greater attention to the sensation novel can make to the history of novelistic representation as a whole. Andrew Mangham explores *The Woman in White* considering the panic over women's sexuality in the 1860s, which even led some male obstetricians to recommend cliterodectomy "as a cure for mental instability in women" (117). Though Walter Hartright appears to play an emancipatory role for women in his rescue of Laura Fairlie, the entire figure of Anne Catherick as double testified to the heterosexual anxieties he suffers as much as does the more obviously heteropatriarchal Sir Percival Glyde (what Carens says about Meredith's Matthew Weyburn is a useful parallel here). Other aspects of women's social definition are ventilated in Lindsey Faber's discussion of sisterhood and Jennifer Swartz's treatment of inheritance law in *The Moonstone*, which, for obvious reasons, could have also potentially included *No Name*.

<13> The final section of *Victorian Sensations* is devoted to race, class, and culture. Co-editor

<13> The final section of *Victorian Sensations* is devoted to race, class, and culture. Co-editor Harrison focuses on Braddon's little-known *The Octoroon* (1861-2). She shows how United States slavery was seen as an exception, to be denounced as it was outside British imperial borders. Thus the novel's excoriation of it did not necessarily indicate desire for racial or social equality within Britain. Yet, Harrison states, Braddon nonetheless semi-inadvertently advertised more porous social formations. The essay is a good complement to Carens's chapter on the Niger River settlement. Lillian Nayder, whose work on Collins is often cited by the other contributors, refreshingly gives a sustained analysis of one constitutive image—the window in Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862). Vicki Corkran Willey somewhat precipitously assumes that Collins shared Dickens's pro-imperial views because of his friendship with Dickens (Carens, for one, would differ), then sensibly analyzes the positive aspects of Ezra Jennings's racial hybridity in a way that complements Carens's chapter. Monica M. Young-Zook takes up a less analyzed Collins novel—*Armadale*, possessing perhaps the most complex and “overdetermined” (234) plot in Victorian fiction. Young-Zook shows us how Ozias Midwinter is gendered and Lydia Gwilt is racialized. This overlap of subject positions liberates the characters from traditional constraints that in other novels would dictate Midwinter be trampled into the role of helping character, Gwilt into reprimanded harridan. Young-Zook shows that the novel's willingness to experiment in depicting racial and gender positions mirrors its experiment in form. Why does Young-Zook refer to (Miss) Jane Blanchard in *Armadale* as “Ms. Blanchard”? Just because “Miss” is not contemporary usage for unmarried woman does not mean the Victorians did not use it. Also, Young-Zook implies a relationship of direct ethnogenetic ancestry between Celtic Scots and Englishmen, which is misleading.

<14> The actress Avonia Jones's performance in the stage version of *East Lynne*, according to Andrew Maunder, shows that melodrama can combine as much as contrast opposites, particularly when it came to the working-class imagination. In an especially rich essay, Tamara S. Wagner examines the interrelationship between sensationalism and suburbia, deploying Collins's *Basil* (1852) as a case study. Wagner's concrete and contextualized sketching of Victorian suburbia adds depth to the Franco Moretti-inspired analyses of novelistic geography that have recently proliferated.

<15> The Victorian image of the sensation novel was pejorative, so “quality” novelists rarely produced works that received that appellation. Yet Diana Archibald's lucid treatment of *Oliver Twist* suggests the collection might have been improved by more attention to the sensationalist aspects of novelists usually deemed outside the category. The essays nibble around the edges of George Eliot's sensationalist aspects (*The Mill On The Floss* is mentioned), trace William Makepeace Thackeray's (*Vanity Fair*) and all but ignore Anthony Trollope's (*Phineas Redux* is cited, *The Eustace Diamonds* is also a natural candidate). More gender theory might have strengthened the essays at times. Nancy Welter's use of Irigaray in discussing the lesbian aspects of “Carmilla” and “Goblin Market” is deft. But Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler also could have informed several of the arguments, however laudable the essays are in not slathering theory over material just as well treated in a more ground-level historical way. A minor lack is the absence of any mention of Henry Kingsley, whose *Recollections Of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859) was a hybrid of the sensation novel and—given his sojourn in Australia—the colonial novel. Analysis of Kingsley's text might have been a good supplement to the general assertions about colonialism throughout the collection. Finally, the editors perhaps overstress how the sensation novel is on the way back today. Its academic resurgence is impressive. But the book's mention of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical version of *The Woman In White*—which was not a financial success on Broadway—shows the limits of this sort of argument with reference to popular culture.

<16> The bibliography of *Victorian Sensations* is particularly thorough, listing both primary and secondary texts. It gives a vital overview of research possibilities in the field. Like the entire book, the bibliography is compiled with expert care and a dedication to amplifying discussion in this emerging field. As with Carens's book, *Victorian Sensations* (appropriately illustrated with a wonderful Augustus Egg painting on the cover) provides a thorough orientation to questions currently being explored with ever greater rigor and gusto in Victorian studies.

