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Disability, Gender and Genre in Victorian Culture

Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture. Martha Stoddard Holmes. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004. 250 + ix pp.

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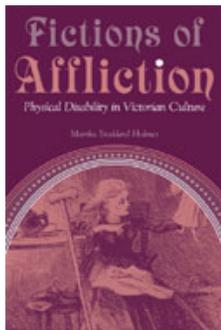
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<1> Until recently, literary criticism has failed to interrogate how representations of physical impairment and debility depend so exclusively on an emotional context or why disability continues to be understood as a trope for many kinds of social marginalization but not for the social and political construction of disability itself. Martha Stoddard Holmes meets both of these critical challenges in her book, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*. Since Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), critical work in disability studies has flourished, but much of it has focused on United States literature and culture (e.g., the work of Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Mary Klages), or on illness and invalidism (e.g. Miriam Bailin, Diane Price Herndl, and Maria H. Frawley). Martha Stoddard Holmes's focus on representations of physical disability in Victorian England is, thus, most welcome. Holmes's book opens with a discussion of the role of melodrama in constructing an entrenched cultural association between physical disability and emotional excess, a focus on affect which permeates the whole of the study. A second chapter explores the disabled woman in a variety of literary and non-literary texts, and a third focuses on the sexuality of disabled women in the works of Wilkie Collins. Chapter four also describes how melodramatic figurations of (mostly working-class) boys and men surfaced in nonliterary texts. The concluding chapter examines how middle-class disabled Victorians, such as Harriet Martineau, used and resisted melodramatic conventions in their self-representations.

<2>As a contribution to gender studies, *Fictions of Affliction* illustrates how in the early nineteenth century, the distinction between categories of able and non-able bodies was “produced partly in terms of the distinction between men and women and what ‘naturally’ characterized each gender” (94). Yet such gendering processes intersected with the work of class, especially since the New Poor Law of 1834 was organized around the morally charged distinction between the able-bodied and non-able bodied (with those deemed capable of self-support excluded from the “deserving poor”). Holmes mines a variety of writing, including drama, novels, and autobiography to illustrate how melodramatic depictions of physical impairment migrated from literary works to the discussion of disability in, for example, medical writings, educational texts, and popular journalism. Because as a form, Victorian melodrama presents an “emotional world based on visual identification” (17), physically impaired characters worked to render moral states visible. Although they occupied polar extremes as pathetic victims or deceptive villains, the disabled always, in some capacity, figured intense emotionality. According to Holmes, disability thus came to act as a “cultural shorthand” for emotional excess, shifting attention away from the economic or political realities of physical impairment. However, gender identity organized a double standard toward male and female variations on disability: while disabled women were seen as subject to emotional excess, their male counterparts were perceived as provoking extreme reactions of pity or suspicion in others—typically about their capacity for work.

<3>As Holmes's study suggests, disabled women often figured in Victorian marriage plots, but their non-marriageability was often taken for granted—especially insofar as these characters were depicted as vulnerable to their emotions. Holmes identifies a popular melodrama, *Les deux orphelines* (1874), as a “clear model” (39) of a pattern in which “pathos not eros” characterizes the disabled girl, “whose job is to suffer abuse,” while her able-bodied twin marries (35). In Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1839) and Dickens's *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1852), disabled women blend affect and eros but remain non-marriageable nonetheless; the blind women in these works become unstable lonely hearts, unable to control their unrequited desires. By contrast, the title character of Dinah Mulock Craik's *Olive* (1850) is a disabled woman whose repression of emotion enables her to acquire “strength, social power, and a surprising variety of

fictional rewards,” including marriage (48). Wilkie Collins’s fiction offers a more sexualized variation on this theme: in *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) disability becomes a site of erotic power for the blind and deaf heroines, both as objects and subjects of desire.

<4>In some ways what these various fictional works suggest is that physically disabled women were portrayed as experiencing dangerous passions inherent in all women but were perceived as experiencing them more intensely. But it is also important to recognize that the particular danger often attributed to the disabled woman’s eros arose from the possibility of her reproducing children who would inherit her physical “afflictions.” Although virtuous disabled female characters who repress their desire out of shame over “tainted blood” are often rewarded by marriage, “no matter how close they get to the traditional Victorian heroine’s plot of courtship, love, and marriage, disabled women characters almost never become biological parents” (6). Ability to control erotic desire thus signifies a non-procreative form of sexuality which renders the disabled woman’s body safe for the marital bond (with Collins offering an unusual exception).

<5>Whereas sexuality is a recurring feature of Holmes’s analysis of female disability, economics is the fulcrum of her treatment of physically impaired men and boys. Holmes focuses particularly on the problems of distinguishing between legitimate and fraudulent claims for poor relief. Looking briefly at Dickens’s melodramatic characterization of disabled boys and men, Holmes shows how nonliterary texts, such as Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* and the reports of the Charity Organisation Society, shaped and reflected these characterizations and affected contemporary policy. The helpless crippled child who deserves charity like Tiny Tim occupies one extreme, while on the other lies the deceptive swindler, like Silas Wegg, who takes advantage of the well-meaning. Ideally, the disabled boy becomes an honest working adult, making the nonworking disabled man at best a permanent child, or at worst, an immoral deceiver seeking poor relief.

<6>Holmes observes that education is surprisingly unreliable. Despite what seem like good intentions, training disabled children for employment created paradoxical circumstances for physically impaired workers. If their employments succeeded, then, perhaps, disabled men required no economic aid; yet if they tried and failed to support themselves like other pauperized men, this failure, perhaps, resulted from moral not physical deficiency. In either case, entitlement to aid was in question, and requiring it was suspicious in a society that saw “no real difference between impostors and those entitled to beg” (130). While educators depended on the charitable impulses encouraged by works such as “A Christmas Carol” to fund their missions, they grappled with the problematic metamorphosis of poor crippled children to morally ambiguous disabled workers. In a pattern similar to one Klages identifies in *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (1999), suspicions about the disabled worker’s capacity for labor made complete helplessness sometimes seem preferable to encouraging economic autonomy. Here too the utility of emotional excess explains why these representations of disabled males appear so frequently and persistently: as in the logic of the 1834 New Poor Law itself, responding to the disabled in affective terms, with either pity or suspicion, reduces their condition to one of personal morality, avoiding the recognition of disability as a social or political issue.

<7>Because the nineteenth century offers rich terrain for exploring disability, a book like this could easily attempt too much, but Holmes maintains a manageable scope for her work. Omissions here hardly seem like limitations, but rather offer further opportunities for research. *Fictions of Affliction* does not address how disabled men negotiated Victorian norms of masculinity that valued reason, decisiveness and self-control, nor does it explore the sexuality of disabled men (a fertile topic given the interest of fictional characters such as Thurstan Benson in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*, Philip Wakem in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, and Bartle Massey in *Adam Bede*). In an adjacent concern, the economic plight of working-class disabled women gets little attention beyond their presumed exclusion from the marriage market. Similarly, her study of middle-class disabled people is limited by choosing four already extraordinary Victorians: poet John Kitto, professor and MP Henry Fawcett, female activist and philanthropist Elizabeth Gilbert, and Harriet Martineau, the renowned author and public intellectual. The accomplishments of these outstanding individuals are unlikely to represent disabled middle-class Victorians more generally. Nonetheless, Holmes’s book establishes important critical groundwork for new Victorianist research in disability. By way of facilitating this goal, Holmes provides a useful appendix listing physically disabled characters in nineteenth-century British literature. *Fictions of Affliction* engages with previous scholarship in a way that strengthens the study of disability in the Victorian era, and sets an admirable precedent for future research in this emerging field.

