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Reading the Pregnant Body in the Victorian Novel

***Pregnancy in the Victorian Novel*. Livia Arndal Woods. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2023. 179 pp.**

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<1>Livia Arndal Woods's *Pregnancy in the Victorian Novel* explores the literary treatment of pregnancy in British novels of the long nineteenth century, which she connects with a historical analysis of the medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth from the period. In charting her analysis of the literary representation of pregnancy, alongside "less traditional and less historically or geographically bound mediations on the cultural significances of bodies and critical attitudes," Woods calls for a "somatic reading" (1) of pregnant bodies in these texts. This reading, which she defines as "an analytical attitude attuned to impressions of the body on the page and in our own messy lived experience" (1), serves as a methodological model that allows space for "critical modesty" and uncertainty that Woods argues are essential to thinking critically about both embodied experiences and textual representations of pregnancy.

<2> Woods's work carefully considers what (and who) is present in these texts and what (and who) is missing, paying particular attention to privilege and perspective across differences in gender, race, and class, as she acknowledges the erasure of non-white, underprivileged women's reproductive experiences in texts from the period. Woods's work plots a historical path through the nineteenth century, organized into thematic chapters ("Judgement," "Sympathy," "Diagnosis," and "Impression"), plus a middle interlude section ("Sensation"), that are arranged in largely chronological order (from mid-century through the fin de siècle), which allows her readers to better understand larger changes that develop in thinking about pregnant women's bodies and their fictional representation across the period.

<3>In the first chapter, Woods illuminates moralistic tendencies in the treatment of pregnancy in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1848), Anthony Trollope's *Can*

You Forgive Her? (1864), and Charlotte Mary Younge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865). Woods uses these works to illustrate how mid-century novels connect moralizing discourse to pregnant women's bodies and "demonstrate[s] how modes of judgment are suggested to readers" (22) through this reading. For, as she argues, "the more readers focus on reproductive bodies in Victorian fiction, the easier it is to participate in moral judgment of those bodies" (25). Chapter Two then moves past morality toward different, and less certain, readings of reproductive bodies. Focusing on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), Woods moves toward "somatic readings of the novels that invite the personal and subjective into the analytical" with hopes of moving "beyond sympathy as the model for ethical engagement with pregnancy, especially pregnancies that occur outside of normative social expectations" (49). Here she concentrates on the "nexus of the novel and the feeling body" (51), which allows readers to see beyond judgment and fosters space for uncertainty and personal experience in the critical analysis and attention we (as readers and critics) bring to pregnant bodies in these texts.

<4>Chapters Three and Four take up this uncertainty, with Chapter Three focused on "diagnosis as a narrative mode for managing uncertainty" (74) and Chapter Four exploring the shift from physical to mental – demonstrating how pregnancy moves from being seen as a disease of the immoral body to the result of a weak mind. Deviating from earlier in the book, Chapter Three combines a close reading of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical writing and stories to call "attention to the ways moral meaning emblazoned onto visibly pregnant bodies in Victorian novels becomes a source of medical signification, a narrative metaphor for masculine process of professionalization founded on the authority to see, know, and say, and a site of resistance to medical and narrative discourse" (92). In Chapter Four Woods considers literature of the fin de siècle where she charts a path that shows how pregnancy becomes symbolic of mental, rather than physical, health. Here Woods offers close readings of Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Lucas Malet's *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901), and Victoria Cross' *Anna Lombard* (1901) to demonstrate the period's "shift from the representation of pregnancy as an expression of a female character's immodest or immoral relationship with her body in the world toward the representation of pregnancy as an expression of the overflow of disordered minds and societies onto and into the bodies that shape the future" (126). Building on previous scholarship on the maternal imagination and the mind/body relationship, Woods's somatic reading calls on scholars to read pregnancy as an embodied condition and "paternal impression" (129).

<5>Sandwiched between the second and third chapters, Woods offers readers an "Interlude," titled "Sensation," that "opens into questions about the ethical obligation to consider the role sensation plays in positioning pregnancy narratives – even pregnancy narrative in which race remains invisible – as expressions of racialized feminine danger and violence" (74). This interlude, which combines a close reading of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) with contemporary maternal mortality statistics and stories, is where Woods's work is at its most uncertain, and also where the work illustrates most clearly the stakes of its argument. In considering racial difference in the embodied experience of pregnancy, both in historical representation of pregnant bodies and contemporary instances, Woods makes clear that if "the present is always with us in our reading bodies, then we should explicitly bring our bodies into our critical modes and questions" (77). In doing so, she demonstrates how racial and economic differences impact pregnant women and makes a compelling case for why the erasure of pregnant black bodies matters in both historical and current terms.

<6>In *Pregnancy and the Victorian Novel*, Woods's somatic reading invites "the uncertainty that inheres in our personal experiences of the body to the literary critical table" (14) and joins the scholarly call for a "critical modesty" that includes "anecdotal experience more familiar to conversations among close friends than to conferences, articles, and scholarly manuscripts" (15). The result is a book that weaves critical close reading and scholarly analysis with anecdotal and personal experience, allowing Woods to demonstrate convincing connections between the Victorian novel and pressing issues of reproductive health and access in contemporary America. A strength of this approach is the line that Woods is able to draw from representations of pregnancy in nineteenth-century novels to issues of reproductive rights and freedom that are vital for women today, making a strong case for why critical scholarship (both on these issues and more broadly) is necessary for thinking about a more equitable future for all people. As Woods argues, “narrative tendencies for the reproduction of pregnancy in the Victorian novel are working in real ways in the twenty-first century, not least in the choice America is making as I write to erase the narratives that imagine reproductive choice from the scripts of real people’s lives” (158).