

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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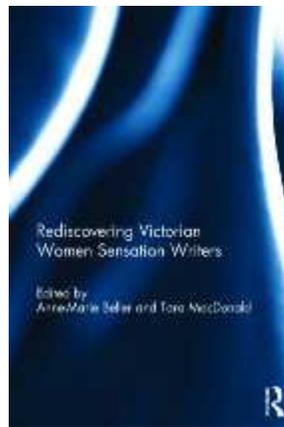
ISSUE 12.2 (SUMMER 2016)

Special Issue:

Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

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### A New Canon?

[\*Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers\*](#). Edited by Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. 142 pp.

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<1>The sensation novel has always provoked a lively debate. What constitutes ‘sensational’? Is it even a genre at all? And was it just a fad that died out after the 1860s? This important collection of seven essays, edited by Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald, addresses these questions, and many more. Originally published as a special issue of *Women’s Writing* in May 2013, the book and its new introduction build on the important work of Andrew Maunder’s *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction, 1855-1890* (2004), which showcased the striking diversity of what is often considered a homogeneous genre.

<2>While other studies have adopted a socio-historical approach to women’s sensation writing, here the focus is on genre and style. This, as the editors explain, is a text-based approach that examines “how

female sensationalists often employ self-reflexivity, metafictional techniques and narrative innovations” (2) — exactly the techniques of which they are often deemed incapable. Space is also given to the problematic issue of canon formation. Do recovered writers simply form part of a new canon, or are we really challenging these structures?

<3>Beller and MacDonald ask that we move beyond Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, whose recovery is now complete. This might have proved challenging a decade or so ago, when studying a lost writer meant dozens of trips to legal deposit libraries. Happily, in the twenty-first century we have access to Google Books, Internet Archive, and also print-on-demand editions of many obscure novels. This collection embraces a range of authors at very different stages in the recovery process (and one who is unequivocally canonical): Rhoda Broughton, Amelia Edwards, George Eliot, Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, Florence Marryat, Ouida, and Ellen Wood.

<4>Tabitha Sparks’s essay on Matilda Houstoun examines *Recommended to Mercy* (1862), a novel that “pushes the boundaries of morality” (11). Although the plot features bigamy, disputed inheritance, and sexual immorality, Sparks argues cogently that it doesn’t fit neatly within the sensation category. Houstoun’s use of realism and the demands made upon her reader mean that it is far removed from the mindless fodder against which Henry Mansel famously cautioned. Instead, Sparks calls for a new genre: the Victorian “novel of experience” (13). This genre would feature a mature and/or experienced hero(ine), explore a controversial theme, evince metafictional narrative techniques, and be written in the period 1860-90 — before the experimentalism of the very late Victorians. Sparks’s stimulating essay both draws attention to an unjustly neglected novel, and encourages us to read other authors in a completely different way.

<5>George Eliot, the “high priestess of literary realism” (24), seems an unlikely addition to a collection of lesser-known Victorian women writers. However, Mary Beth Tegan’s essay provides a thought-provoking counterpoint to the other essays. As Tegan explains, Eliot wished to be seen as a literary novelist, yet craved the commercial success enjoyed by sensation writers. She dismissed their work as “a heap of trash” but also “exploit[ed] elements which appeal to sensation fiction readers” (927). The boundaries that were so carefully patrolled and presented as fixed, are shown in Eliot’s novel *Romola* (1862-3) to be mutable. Charles Reade’s devastating critique of Eliot, that she had exploited the sensation genre “as far as her feeble powers would let her” (27), suggests Eliot actually enjoyed less latitude than her ‘trashy’ contemporaries.

<6>In ‘Sensational Ghosts’, Nick Freeman illustrates how Ellen Wood, Amelia Edwards, and Rhoda Broughton were able to exploit the well-established (and profitable), genre of the ghost story while also experimenting with form and theme. As Freeman argues, “these stories show an artful awareness of convention and audience” but also emphasise “the precariousness of female existence” (54). Broughton’s ‘The Man with the Nose’ (1872), for example, is a classic tale of the unexpected, but one that also plays with controversial ideas surrounding women’s sexuality.

<7>Broughton is also the focus of Tamara S. Wagner’s essay — perhaps an indication of her growing status in the recovery project. Broughton’s long career and refusal to neatly fit a particular literary

category makes her a rewarding author to study. But, as Wagner clarifies, “not all of Broughton’s novels do what critics want them to do, and hence her deliberate toying with narrative conventions still makes her reassessment problematic or, at best, piecemeal” (60). This is skilfully demonstrated through Wagner’s analysis of *Nancy* (1873), which “simultaneously trades on and eschews the genre’s parameters” (71). Wagner argues that by using a self-reflexive technique, Broughton plays upon her readers’ narrative expectations, rejecting traditional sensation tropes.

<8>If there is any doubt that sensational fiction persisted beyond the 1860s, the work of Florence Marryat provides substantial evidence that it was still flourishing at the fin de siècle. Her novels remained shocking, while those of her contemporaries were quietly absorbed into the mainstream. In an essay on Marryat’s *An Angel of Pity* (1898), Greta Depledge proposes that Marryat goes much further than writers such as Sarah Grand, who were often credited with radicalism. This anti-vivisection novel masquerading as a love story, described accurately by Depledge as “blatant propaganda” (81), includes extensive graphic material that was lifted from pamphlets by Frances Power Cobbe and other campaigners. Marryat’s skill is in using her fiction “as a medium through which she can engage in a contemporary and contentious debate, while still providing a plot that should satisfy her loyal readership”. (87) Depledge makes the key point that the sensational novel was often concerned with real social change, rather than merely exploiting fashionable topics. As is clear throughout this collection, the sensation novel and its practitioners refuse to be neatly contained.

<9>Lisa Hager categorises Ouida’s *Princess Napraxine* (1884) as a “post-sensation novel” (90) and considers its relationship with New Woman discourses of the 1890s. Ouida’s inclusion in the sensation school has always been problematic, given her tendency to set stories in exotic locations, rather than the middle-class home. Neither is she a New Woman author. Ouida’s famous disagreement with Sarah Grand and oft-quoted 1894 article for the *North American Review* depict a ferociously individualistic writer, whose life and work defies any label. Instead, Hager sees her as “bridg[ing] the gap between sensation fiction’s notorious investigation of the body’s experiences of physical desire and New Woman discourse’s sustained inquiry into the possibility of agency for women within Victorian society.” (93)

<10>In the final essay, Jane Jordan continues the Ouida debate by studying her work within the context of literary censorship. Jordan claims that Ouida was “the most outrageous of female sensation novelists,” (103) an award for which there is stiff competition from within this collection and beyond. Ouida certainly upset the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, who censored three stage adaptations of her novel *Moths* (1880), and many free libraries refused to stock her works. As Jordan’s essay makes apparent, it is important to understand the context of censorship in which authors were operating. How much further would they have gone without the economic imperative of satisfying Mudie’s conservative tastes?

<11>Inevitably, *Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers* can consider only a handful of deserving cases, a limitation readily acknowledged by its editors. Beller and MacDonald mention Annie Thomas, Charlotte Riddell, and Annie French as significant novelists who deserve far more critical attention. This is a call to action, and a model on which the recovery project can be continued. The

essays therein provide an excellent starting point and some refreshingly different modes of thinking. Let's hope it leads to another collection of equally intriguing and provocative writers.