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Bruised Faces, Private Places, Public Gazes

Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction. Lisa Surridge. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005. xiv + 271 pp.

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<1> In our reality-television obsessed culture, the voyeuristic experience of others' lives is commonplace. In fact, we're somewhat blasé about it, perhaps viewing domestic abuse as nothing more than another Lifetime network movie. Although domestic violence is an age-old problem, twenty-first century consumers of such media may tend to think of themselves as more in touch than the Victorians, whose attitudes on marriage and sexuality might seem comparatively naive. Then again, one need only think of Punch and Judy, the seeping bloodstain in the closing chapters of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, or Dickens's obsession with reenacting Nancy's murder in *Oliver Twist* to realize that Victorian culture may have been just as attuned to domestic violence as our own. In *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*, Lisa Surridge traces the intersecting impact of changes in divorce and marriage law, journalistic reporting of court cases resulting from those changes, and the appearance of a variety of fictional narratives that include domestic abuse. Her analysis starts with the 1828 Offenses Against the Person Act and proceeds chronologically to the 1904 publication of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange," which features domestic abuse as its major theme. The inclusion of excerpts from Victorian court cases not only validates her claims, but also makes for consistently compelling argument.

<2> The first two chapters deal with early Dickens works such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), beginning with Nancy, the prostitute with a heart of gold, and her abusive common-law husband, Bill Sikes. Surridge acknowledges that there was "an enormous anxiety concerning the new visibility of wife assault" (17), since its suitability as a topic of public knowledge and comment was hotly debated. She sees this as a "moment at which a new interventionist ethos competed with an earlier laissez-faire attitude to marital violence" (27). She further claims that Dickens makes Nancy a sympathetic character by depicting her deep devotion to Bill and, in doing so, turning a lower-class streetwalker into something very like the epitome of a devoted, middle-class wife. What thus emerges is a portrait of behavior that belongs not just to the lower classes (the argument of many Victorian Parliamentarians), but, rather, a pattern that could apply to middle-class domesticity as well. Surridge convincingly concludes that the deaths of Nancy and Bill Sikes "represent, respectively, the glorification of the loyal passive woman and the drive toward public intervention in marital violence" (43).

<3> Surridge then turns her attention to *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), which she claims shows the "connections between manliness and family violence" and "a growing trend in the 1840s and 1850s for Victorians to see domestic assault as a man's issue" (45). The Dombey household is plagued by three problems: Edith's determination to assert her independence by leaving her husband and his household, Mr. Dombey's failure to control his wife and his subsequent displacement of spousal abuse onto his innocent daughter, and Florence's flight from her father's home, which brings the family's private business into the public gaze. Both father and daughter, Surridge argues, can only be healed by returning to the home in order to privately repent their faults. Edith is the most problematic figure in the novel since "she stands as evidence of Dickens's anxious awareness that the idealizing discourse of manly reform failed to contemplate the rebellious woman who refused to be contained by the middle-class home" (71).

<4> Surridge next focuses on Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) which, she claims, "criticizes marital coverture as an underlying cause of domestic assault and abuse, and compares women to domestic animals abused by their owners" (73). The text is also distinctive because it depicts marital violence in a wealthy home, rather than in a lower-class one, where most Victorians assumed domestic violence was contained. Surridge effectively argues that



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Brontë's text logically illustrates that marital coverture gives men the idea that their power as husbands entitles them to abuse their wives, and that women like Helen Huntington were powerless under the law to escape, almost like pets "abused by their owners" (73). She also contends that domestic abuse was seen as a problem that could be eradicated by reforming masculinity. The novel begins in the Regency and, as the narrative progresses, bad husbands seem to be a thing of the past, something that should be left behind by the more progressive, morally-evolved Victorians. "What Brontë articulated—resistance to coverture, claim to children, financial independence—was," SurrIDGE writes, "to be the foundation of the liberal feminist response to marital violence for the next three decades" (86). SurrIDGE is to be commended for thus highlighting the critical importance of Anne Brontë, who has languished in the shadow of her more famous sisters for far too long.

<5> She next takes on George Eliot by looking at "Janet's Repentance" (1857), an unconventional story by an unconventional woman which explores the idea that "wife assault was related to the structure of marriage itself" (105). The story, which appeared at the height of debates in the 1850s on women's place in marriage, depicts Janet, a woman who has become an alcoholic as a result of her abusive relationship. Rather than vilifying her for this, Eliot makes Janet a sympathetic character, taken in by the community after her husband expels her from their home. Marital abuse thus becomes a public, rather than a private, problem in the story, and both the community and Janet are healed by their mutual interaction. SurrIDGE says "We can hardly imagine a greater—or quieter—challenge to the protective structures of coverture" (131), effectively demonstrating the shift in the perception of marital abuse as a strictly private matter.

<6> SurrIDGE moves on to examine the relationship between newspaper reporting of the domestic violence described in divorce court and the simultaneous flourishing of sensation fiction. Like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* before it, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859) shows "marital cruelty in the upper classes" (133). SurrIDGE refutes Marlene Tromp's claim that sensation fiction exposed marital violence to the public, arguing instead that "the sensation novel and the newspaper together participated" in this exposure (135). She acknowledges Barbara Leckie's argument that novels and divorce court journalism's episodic nature created a desire for more information about domestic abuse, a claim that seems especially true for a "page-turner" like *The Woman in White*. The novel, she suggests, is like a newspaper report of a divorce trial, ensuring that "marital conduct was never private" (146).

<7> The next chapter, which deals with Anthony Trollope's novel *He Knew She Was Right* (1868-69) is possibly the best chapter in the book. SurrIDGE posits that Louis Trevelyan's "obsession with the newspaper reporting of divorce cases. . .reflects a more general anxiety concerning the public scrutiny of private life" (168). The novel shows the evolution of public opinion on marital abuse—what was once commonly assumed to be a problem belonging solely to the lower classes has become one that sees lower-class citizens as the witnesses to and reporters of domestic abuse rather than as its main perpetrators. SurrIDGE examines the tainting influence of Detective Bozzle, whose presence makes Trevelyan's world "a court, he himself constantly subject[ing] his marriage to the imagined scrutiny of the public gaze" (172). She boldly claims that the text shows "that the newspaper has become the major arbiter of Victorian social life" (174), a claim that is substantiated if, following John Sutherland's recommendation, one reads *The Times'* columns for 1867 alongside Trollope's novel (168). SurrIDGE's interweaving of actual court cases with elements of the novel is particularly masterful in this chapter, and makes for most interesting reading.

<8> In the penultimate chapter, SurrIDGE turns to Mona Caird's little known novel, *The Wings of Azrael* (1889). This is a somewhat risky move since most readers will be unfamiliar with the text. SurrIDGE argues that Caird's novel "represents the ideological impasse of the New Woman facing the failure of liberal reform" (188). She believes that early feminists saw sexually transmitted diseases and husband's conjugal rights as forms of marital abuse. The novel shows domestic abuse as part of a hereditary cycle, and "in its preoccupation with marital rape" the novel is "thoroughly rooted in the print culture and politics of the late-Victorian period" (191). SurrIDGE suggests that the novel is exemplary of various contexts including the efforts to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act, the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888, and "Caird's own provocative public questioning of whether marriage itself was a failure" (191).

<9> SurrIDGE concludes her study with a chapter devoted to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box," in which the main clue is a box containing two severed human ears. She contends that Holmes's cases represent the idea that "the solution to a particular case

stands for the solution to the larger problem" (217), and although she does not state it, the two severed ears seem to represent Victorian culture's ability to listen to tales of domestic violence with new, more "open" ears than they did at the beginning of the era. She states that Holmes is the exemplar of the protective male who sees marital violence as a "perennial problem" (218), and that his cases invite the public to help police private behavior. The Holmes stories put a new spin on the "problem" of the working, independent woman by casting females in situations where they need male protection — not only from Holmes, but from the reader as well. Surridge again discusses animals as representative of violence by looking at "The Hound of the Baskervilles," where "the hound clearly represents the social problem of violence against women" (232). She contends that the illustrations that appeared with the stories invite the reader's gaze, making the reader a participant in solving the crime. "The 'imagined community' that the novel or the newspaper creates," she argues, "is one in which the investigation of private conduct comes full circle to the reader" (242).

<10> Surridge's arguments are consistently interesting and what the book sometimes lacks in eloquence, it more than makes up in information. Because she discusses so many court cases and legal changes, it would have been immensely helpful if she had included a chronological table of these events. However, Surridge has written a solid work, one that opens the field for future scholarship and debate. The beautiful interweaving of actual court testimony with literary analysis, as well as her inclusion of works by both canonical and non-canonical authors, both male and female, makes for a balanced, fascinating study of an area that is ripe for scholarship.

