

***Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855-1890*, edited by Andrew Maunder (General Editor) and others. 6 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004. xlviii + 400; liii + 447; xxxiv + 446; lvii + 532; xxvi + 333; xlv + 347. ISBN 1851967710. £495/US\$840 (hardback).**

The critical renaissance of sensation fiction seems likely to remain among the enduring legacies to Victorian studies of a *rapprochement* between late twentieth-century feminist scholarship and resurgent historicism. But what began as an attempt to prise open the tightly exclusive academic canon of “great” Victorian novels has inevitably created canons of its own, and attention has very largely restricted itself to a narrow range of authors and titles: four or five books by Wilkie Collins, a couple of early works by Mary Braddon, and, last and very decidedly least, *East Lynne*. To confine sensation fiction to a handful of texts and to the 1860s, however, is to misrepresent both its longevity and its variety. Writers in the 1880s and later regularly chose to traffic in the narrative ploys – the misplaced relatives, forged wills, bigamous marriages, unexplained disappearances and dangerous temptresses – whose potential was already being copiously realised a generation before. Moreover, as Graham Law shrewdly observes in his introduction to Dora Russell’s *Beneath the Wave* (Volume 6 in the series under review), in order to recuperate for twenty-first century readers the fiction of the mid-Victorian decades, critics have tended on the one hand to exaggerate its radicalism and on the other to play down the contributions of “more sedate practitioners” like Ellen Wood or of evangelical periodicals like *Good Words*, though both “invested heavily” in sensation during the 1860s and 1870s.

There are compelling reasons, then, to welcome a handsomely produced and expertly edited selection of six “new” sensation novels. The General Editor, Andrew Maunder, is, on his own admission, a fiercely “partial” champion of the genre (going so far at one point as to describe the wittily hostile Dean Mansel as “vicious”), and we must be grateful to his enthusiasm and to that of his collaborators for making accessible a series of texts which should both stimulate and enable us to rethink sensation’s contours and which could not, for the most part, be otherwise consulted outside copyright libraries. In the set’s first volume, moreover, Maunder reprints a very generous selection of early reviews and discussions (intended partly to complement Norman Page’s *Critical Heritage* volume on Wilkie Collins) and attempts a comprehensive listing of sensation novels which includes at least some indication of the crimes and misdemeanours that each endeavours to exploit.

All of this is very much to the good, and my reservations about the design and execution of the series do not begin to outweigh my admiration for its overall achievement. The first of those reservations concerns the choice of texts. Of the six novels reprinted, two – Felicia Skene’s *Hidden Depths* and Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower* – are already available in modern editions (the former in Robert Lee Wolff’s 1972 series *Victorian Fiction: Novels of Faith and Doubt*, the

latter in a 1993 paperback published by the invaluable Alan Sutton). The decision to reprint them again, even with the addition of notes and scholarly introductions, requires some justification when so many other worthy candidates can be consulted only in early editions. Furthermore, there is no general editorial defence of the specific selections that have been made: instead, categories are invented so that novels can appear to have been rigorously chosen in order to exemplify them. Thus, for example, Wood's *St Martin's Eve* gets promoted as a representative specimen of "Gothic Sensationalism" and Florence Marryat's *Love's Conflict* is firmly labelled as an instance of the "Domestic" variety. This practice entails problems for the more ingenuous editors, Mark Knight, for example, being compelled to admit in his introduction to Mary Cecil Hay's *Old Myddelton's Money* that its claims to being an example of "Sensation and Detection" are fairly tenuous, and indeed, that the book's "turn away from a detective narrative may be seen as an attempt to keep the direction of the novel fresh and innovative." Knight, if his introduction is any guide, would have been happier to categorise Hay's book as "Sensation With a Purpose," but that, alas, is a classification already monopolised by Felicia Skene. The arbitrariness of these subdivisions becomes yet more apparent when *Beneath the Wave* is labelled "Newspaper Sensation" and Graham Law has to spend time explaining that he doesn't mean by this what Dean Mansel meant when he coined the term (which for once therefore actually echoes Victorian critical taxonomy) but something entirely different – not, that is, a novel which recycles newspaper reports of civil and criminal cases, but one which was syndicated in provincial news miscellanies.

But if the series doesn't do enough to justify its particular choices, neither does it seem much concerned to explain its originary exclusion – the decision to limit attention only to novels written by women. Large numbers of extremely successful sensation novels, after all, were written by men – apart from Collins, one thinks of Yates, Sala and Shirley Brooks – so not reprinting a sample of their work can only be the result of a critical judgment that women's achievement in this genre was distinctively different and so can be separately explored. Now that, admittedly, is the position adopted by some Victorian critics of both sexes, but their discriminations are very largely derived from the ideology of separate spheres – women writers, for example, were frequently supposed to prefer locating their sensations in immediate proximity to the domestic hearth, while their male counterparts were held to venture more freely into the public domain. Andrew Maunder guardedly echoes these shakily *a priori* assumptions in his General Introduction, but beyond that he does little to establish any credible reasons for accepting that sensation fiction can, or should, be subdivided according to the sex of its authors.

If, furthermore, there are problems with the general design of the series, there are also more local difficulties with individual texts. For one thing, editorial introductions sometimes strain to claim more for a particular novel than

uncommitted readers might readily allow, and this in turn derives partly from an indecisiveness (shared by Andrew Maunder in the General Introduction) about whether what is being proposed for sensation fiction is an historically symptomatic interest or an aesthetic achievement; the two are not, of course, incompatible, but there seems often to be a felt obligation to tack a case for the second loosely on to a more developed exploration of the first, as though a book's disclosure of hairline cracks in Victorian ideology must necessarily make for a rattling good read. Again, some introducers try too hard to establish a "progressive" or controversial agenda for their chosen author. Lilian Nayder, for example, is right to stress that Skene, in *Hidden Depths*, is very alert to the moral double standard which condemns prostitutes and absolves their clients, but she surely underestimates the level of Skene's endorsement of rigid class divisions, and her assertion that the heroine's refuge for fallen women is to be seen as "an all-female community best characterized by the freedoms it affords" tactfully overlooks the information that this utopia is located "too far from any town" to induce attempts at "escape" on the part of its inmates. Similarly, when a character in *Old Myddelton's Money* drops a casual remark about "these degenerate days," Mark Knight, not recognising a cliché when he sees one (and the phrase, after all, can be found in Pope), provides an extensive footnote on contemporary debates about degeneration, even though those debates have no visible relevance to Hay's pallid narrative. Throughout the series, indeed, annotation is of very variable quality, so that, for example, even the formidable Lyn Pykett can be found claiming that "the heir presumptive to a baronetcy" will inherit the title of baron; Lilian Nayder glosses "scarlet gown" as "the robe of an Oxford Doctor of Philosophy" when no such degree existed in the nineteenth century, and Andrew Maunder himself explains that a "Mr. Smith" referred to in the *Cambridge Review* is the writer John Frederick Smith although it is perfectly clear that the reference is to the protagonist of Lucy Walford's 1874 novel of that title. Maunder also fails to recognise in Janus Weathercock the pen-name of Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, announces that Book One of *Paradise Lost* "opens with a council meeting in the Palace Pandemonium," and hazards that *Punch's* spoof sensation novel *Mokeanna* "may have been by the humorist F. C. Burnand" when Burnand himself put the matter beyond any doubt in an article in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in June 1899.

Aside from its retrieval of primary texts, the most useful feature of *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction* will be the bibliography appended to the first volume. Andrew Maunder is sensibly both modest and cautious in his preface to this catalogue, conceding that definitions are elastic and making no claims to completeness, but he has nevertheless produced a research tool of considerable value. Although it would be possible to quarrel with some of his omissions and inclusions (*Geoffry Hamlyn*, for example, strikes me as distinctly unsensational but gains admission, while *The Hillyars and the Burtons*, which surely qualifies, is absent), a mere glance at the size of the list – nearly a hundred pages of it – amply

supports Maunder's argument for the genre's durability and range, and it can be confidently predicted that future researchers will find it indispensable. Its value would have been greatly enhanced by a slightly more generous annotation of plot highlights: to note merely that Le Fanu's *Guy Deverell* is "a story of murder" is to tell the reader little that is useful – but then, Maunder misses a circumstantial allusion to the novel in the second of Margaret Oliphant's well-known *Blackwood's* articles, so perhaps his skimming of this particular text has been more than usually hurried.

For all its occasional failings, there can be no doubt of this project's utility to scholars. As to the readerly pleasures on offer, I can speak only for myself. *Cometh Up as a Flower* seems to me as lively and provocative as it did on first reading, but renewing my acquaintance with *St Martin's Eve* has confirmed a long-held suspicion that Mrs Henry Wood was by an impressive margin the least intelligent successful novelist of Victorian England. Florence Marryat has a lively way with dialogue (her stage experience no doubt helped) and her evocation of domestic violence is chilling – though not as chilling as her conviction that its married women victims have a duty to grin and bear it. Mary Cecil Hay, for all Mark Knight's gallant efforts, fails to set the pulses racing, and Felicia Skene's concern for fallen women needs to be set against her passionate enthusiasm for a pathologically vindictive deity (who at one point, she gloats, upsets the carriage of an aristocratic lecher in order that his head-injuries should render him too simple-minded to repent and so save himself from Hell). The pick of the bunch, for my money, and the real discovery of the series, is Dora Russell, whose *Beneath the Wave* exhibits (for all its genuflections toward piety and virtue) a sneaking imaginative sympathy with racy backsliders. The selfish, bitchy, adulterous Bella, Graham Law sternly argues, is "entirely" denied "authorial understanding," but she seems to me to emerge remarkably unscathed after her various turpitudes: following a bout of typhus (with which she fatally infects the novel's saintly clergyman), she is briefly penitent, but she very quickly gets bored with decency and heads off to a life of well-heeled self-indulgence in Paris, Russell pointedly dropping no hint whatever that she'll come to a sticky end. The wickedness of living for pleasure in the Capital of the Nineteenth Century is to be taken as read, of course, but it's also allowed to sound like fun, and that makes a refreshing change from the private madhouse or the suicide's unmarked grave in which the Bellas of Victorian fiction more generally conclude their careers.

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