

Science, Sexuality and Sensation Novels: Pleasures of the Senses

Laurie Garrison. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 226pp. ISBN 978-0-230-20316-7

In *Science, Sexuality and Sensation Novels: Pleasures of the Senses*, Laurie Garrison's stated aim is to investigate contemporary Victorian responses to the sensation novel in the light of specifically physiological concerns, rather than to continue the more "psychological" emphasis of previous studies such as Jenny Bourne Taylor's *In the Secret Theatre of Home* (1988). One critical oversight rectified by Garrison throughout this study is that while previous criticism on the sensation novel has often identified the concern expressed by Victorian literary reviewers relating to the effect that the reading of sensation fiction might have on the reader's body, it has not engaged deeply, as Garrison does, with explaining how these same reviews relied heavily on using terms and concepts derived from contemporary physiological theory and how the reviews themselves engaged with questions about the senses, perception, and subjectivity. In addition to providing a fine discussion of such criticism, *Science, Sexuality and Sensation Novels* delivers close readings of a broad range of sensation novels including Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60), Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1866-67), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1861-62), focusing on their use of physiological theory, Darwinian theories of adaptation, and the pseudo-sciences of mesmerism and spiritualism. Also included, however, are a fascinating analysis of the much less commonly discussed *St. Martin's Eve* (1866) by Ellen Wood, and a discussion of evolutionary adaptation in *Great Expectations* (1860-1).

Garrison's first chapter provides a highly informative crystallisation of Victorian critical responses to the sensation novel. While the contemporary reception of the sensation novel genre has been discussed repeatedly by critics over the past twenty to thirty years, such discussions have often focused heavily on a very limited number of critiques, especially on the condemnatory responses of H.L. Mansel and Margaret Oliphant. While this has begun to change recently – for example, in *Victorian Sensation Fiction* (2009) Andrew Radford provided a thorough overview of Victorian responses to the sensation novel – Garrison further extends the scope of such discussion by including a much larger selection of Victorian responses than are usually selected for such overviews, for example, citing an often neglected review from the *Medical Critic and Psychological Journal* and discussing several parodies of the sensation novel. Indeed, a highlight is the extended discussion of the comic novella *Groweth Down Like a Toadstool* (1876-7). While previous criticism on the genre has often suggested that upon the emergence of the sensation novel critics were immediately worried about the effect that reading sensation fiction might have on women's bodies and morality, Garrison establishes that these particular anxieties in fact did not appear in reviews until 1864 and thereafter. The discussion of these reviews and parodies largely avoids regarding them as "negative" or "positive" and instead focuses on their expression of ambivalence and anxiety and their reference to contemporary physiological knowledge. This section makes particularly strong use of references to Alexander Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) and G.H. Lewes's *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859).

The second chapter, "Magnetic Science and the Sensation Novel," clearly delineates the differences between the practices of mesmerism and spiritualism and establishes the range of anxieties associated with each practice by the Victorian public. Garrison supplies more detail about the major scandals related to mesmeric practice and to spiritualism than I have seen elsewhere. This discussion is followed by two close readings, of Collins's *The Woman in White* and Broughton's *Cometh Up as A Flower*. By offering a range of case studies of

scandals related to the two pseudo-sciences and by quoting extensively from spiritualist works, Garrison assists the reader to better apprehend the anxieties about mesmerism and spiritualism explored in each novel.

Various arguments about *The Woman in White* put forward in this chapter seemed to me less convincing than those argued in relation to *Cometh Up as A Flower*. Previous commentary on *The Woman in White* has usually viewed Count Fosco's "taming" of Madame Fosco as an example of "moral management". Garrison, however, suggests that the change in Madame Fosco's behaviour and temperament is a clear result of Fosco's mesmeric influence. Garrison also argues that Fosco attempts to mesmerise Marian but that this is thwarted by Laura's observation of the Count and by Laura's deliberate instigation of a close erotic and mesmeric bond between Marian and herself. Marian's dream of Walter in South America and his promise to return and exact retribution is also presented as evidence of Marian and Laura's mesmeric connection. However, Collins's novels and short stories often involve a character experiencing portents or dreams of events to come – such events in *Armadale* (1866) for example, leave characters uncertain about the existence of Fate. The dream experienced by Marian, therefore, need not have any connection to mesmerism, and various elements of the textual examples provided here do not seem to match entirely with the non-fictional information supplied about the mechanics of mesmerism. Although I would voice such observations, Garrison should be credited for advancing a reading that offers an alternative understanding of Madame Fosco's docility.

Chapter three, "Social Science and the Sensation Heroine", includes innovative, convincing readings of Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, Wood's *St. Martin's Eve*, and Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Earlier Garrison discusses how Bain's writings on physiology had postulated that the body can create sensations without external stimulus – and can therefore create inappropriate sensations of its own accord, or be trained to do so (8-9) – ideas that may shed light on Estella's "lack of a heart". Garrison also draws very strong connections between Estella's behaviour and the theories developed by Herbert Spencer in *Social Statics* (1851). It is not simply that Estella has been brainwashed by Miss Havisham but that her social conditioning can also be read in terms of biological adaptation: "environment determines social behaviour and in turn causes man's physical body to alter" (125). Miss Havisham may actually have trained Estella not to register physical sensations. The quality of analysis is strong throughout this chapter, with Garrison demonstrating *Great Expectations*' reversal of Darwinian theory – Estella's ability to have her choice of suitors is at odds with Darwin's theory that males select their mates – and then extending discussion of Spencer and Darwin to her analyses of partner selection, partner training, and heredity in *Aurora Floyd* and *St. Martin's Eve*.

Although some thematic connections are made between chapters, *Science, Sexuality and Sensation Fiction* does not entirely read as a cohesive whole, but rather as a series of chapters on different aspects of Victorian debates about physiology, social sciences, and reader responses to sensation novels. It does, however, succeed in bringing together some fascinating close readings of sensation novels and accomplished analyses of pertinent questions raised by sensation fiction's engagement with the physiological and pseudo-scientific. *Science, Sexuality and Sensation Novels* offers material that is very likely to interest those readers who have enjoyed recent studies of the sensation novel's engagement with physiology, neurology, and medicine such as Laurence Talairach-Vielmas's *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic* (2009) or Nicholas Dames's *The Physiology of*

the Novel (2007) or to reward those interested in evolutionary science, theories of reading, or in Victorian literature's transmission of affect.

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