Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855-1890

Sensationalism and the Sensation Debate

Edited by Andrew Maunder
VARIETIES OF WOMEN’S SENSATION FICTION:
1855–1890
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VARIETIES OF WOMEN’S SENSATION FICTION: 1855–1890

General Editor
Andrew Maunder

VOLUME 1
SENSATIONALISM AND THE SENSATION DEBATE

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the spring and summer of 1891 the genteel magazine the *Lady's Pictorial* conducted a series of interviews with twenty-four of the most influential women of the day. One of its journalists, Helen Black, had come to meet some of the decade's most famous novelists – Florence Marryat, Rhoda Broughton, Charlotte Riddell and Eliza Lynn Linton – all of whom had achieved widespread fame through their talent for writing. The tone was set by Black when she told her readers about her meeting with the ‘motherly’, retiring Mrs Linton, ‘the woman for whose genius you have ever entertained the greatest reverence’.¹ Three years later, Black began her rounds again, this time visiting popular author Dora Russell, (‘a notable housekeeper’ possessed of ‘a very pretty taste in arranging flowers and decorating a supper table’) and was similarly captivated.² Despite their professed dislike of the spotlight, devotion to household duties and lady-like reluctance to seek attention, Black was in no doubt that the names of all these writers and their ‘great accumulation of literature’ would live on for many years to come. After all, she gushed, ‘no remembrances can be happier than the delightful hours spent with the “Notable Women Authors”’.³

Since for most of the next 100 years almost all of the women interviewed by Black fell out of print and became forgotten, her optimism proved misplaced. And yet in the early 1890s there was clearly something about them which allowed Black to feel that their work would last. Rhoda Broughton, for example, was widely reckoned the ‘Queen of the Circulating Libraries’, had a mountain, ‘Mount Rhoda’, christened after her, and counted no less an intellect than W. E. Gladstone among her admirers. Florence Marryat had, as Helen Black observed, ‘a long record of successes’.⁴ The work of another interviewee, Mathilda Betham Edwards, had led to her being honoured by the French government, and her work praised by George Eliot, Dante Rossetti and Herbert Spencer. Between 1866 and her death in 1905 Charlotte Riddell published more than thirty novels under different names, including a best-seller *George Geith of Fen Court* (1864) and achieved ‘a high literary reputation’, being compared at various times to George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell.⁵ Yet in the years following their deaths (Marryat died in 1899; Riddell in 1906, Bitham-Edwards in 1919 and Broughton in 1920) they simply went missing, falling from widespread success into obscurity.
Articles in periodicals referring to their work became few and far between, and they came to be seen as minor and inconsequential.

It is interesting to speculate why these once popular novelists were so little regarded by the beginning of the twentieth century. One possible reason has to with changes in publishing, in particular the decline in the 1880s and 1890s of the three-volume novel format – so dominant for much of the nineteenth century. In a recent article on Charlotte Riddell, Linda Peterson describes how, when the prestigious firm of Macmillan took over Richard Bentley and Son (one of the largest suppliers of the three-volume novel), authors like Riddell were unable to adapt and found themselves without a publishing venue.

Another explanation is that the decline of interest these writers and their works is illustrative of the processes described by Joan DeJean and Nancy K. Miller in *Displacements*, their study of canon formation, wherein the ‘social preferences of a given cultural moment are erased, forgotten, and re-written’ by later generations in what they term ‘the dominant culture’s imaginary’. Such ‘cleansing’, as De Jean and Miller term it, was much to the fore at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when, as Suzanne Clark points out, ‘the modernist exclusion of everything but the forms of high art acted like a machine for cultural loss of memory’.

The Victorian women writers were older by a generation than Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence and Rebecca West – the writers who made up the new (career-envious) literary intelligentsia. As modernism began to take shape with revolutionary fervour, and ‘new expressions, new moulds for our thoughts & feelings’ in Mansfield’s words, took over, it became very easy to see the older women novelists and their kind as out of date, too pompous and too entangled in the paraphernalia of Victorianism to speak meaningfully to a modern sensibility. By this time none of them had the kind of glamorous appearance that might have helped to keep them in fashion. Moreover, as the ‘Great Divide’ between high art and mass culture widened in the 1900s and the field of ‘cultural production’ (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology) changed, it established new criteria for measuring literary achievement. A high symbolic value was placed on work which could be labelled ‘new’, ‘experimental’, uncluttered and written with ‘finish’. This was set against work associated with the previous generation of successful novelists – an unappealing mix of the moralistic, the sprawling, churned out for money and popularity, and belonging to a less exalted land of literary creativity. Virginia Woolf’s disdainful comments about Lucy Clifford, author of *Mrs Keith’s Crime* (1885), made in 1920 after a visit to the older woman’s home, are particularly striking in this respect. Woolf transformed her hostess, an innovative and revisionary novelist, into a figure of ridicule: ‘false teeth … hair frizzed out … browned by art … large codfish eyes & the whole figure of the nineties – black velvet – morbid – intense, jolly, vulgar – a hack to her tips … an atmo-
sphere of rancid cabbage & old clothes stewing in their own water’. Obsessed by ‘money, royalties, editions and reviews’, Clifford’s philistinism was for Woolf all too evident, and she felt separated from her by a great gulf. ‘How these old women spoil my life’, she complained to Lytton Strachey.

It was not, of course, modernists alone who put paid to the Victorian women writers. As David Goldie has noted, the widespread sense after the First World War of the need for ‘a fresh start’ also ‘helped accelerate the next generation’s repudiation of its literary inheritance’. The Victorian women’s literary achievements (‘a species of absurd fiction’ characterized by their ‘simple-minded plots’ and ‘governess mentality’, as Oliver Elton put it in his 1920 Survey of English Literature) seemed particularly tame and antique. This was also the message delivered by H. W. Seaman writing in the middle-brow Daily Mail in 1924 and thus speaking for the general populace rather more than Woolf and her set did. The tone of Seaman’s comments about ‘this great company of story tellers’ was kinder than that of Woolf’s but the sentiments were the same. The fame these women once had was now ‘forgotten’ and this was because ‘they wrote not for all times but for their own times. And times have changed’. They had outlived their usefulness.

Were Virginia Woolf or H. W. Seaman alive today, they would no doubt shudder at the interest which Lucy Clifford and others of this ‘great company’ of ‘old women’ have begun to generate. The last fifteen years in particular have seen a remarkable revival of interest in nineteenth-century ‘popular’ fiction and its exponents are no longer regarded as indisputably unimportant or devoid of interest. Scholars have begun to turn their attention away from the established canon of mid-Victorian fiction (which has long consisted of Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope and Hardy, and the Brontës, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell) and have turned back to some of the novelists interviewed by Helen Black in the 1890s.

One of the things which recent revisionist work has recovered and evaluated is a mass of fiction by women writers that was highly influential in the development of the novel in mid-Victorian Britain. There is a growing acceptance that reading these novels by women in their literary context, enriches our understanding and interpretation of Victorian fiction generally. There is also recognition that this large corpus of ‘popular’ work cannot be loftily dismissed as mere ‘trash’, devoid of meaningful social and political reference. In Sensational Designs, Jane Tompkins has made the point that the early twentieth-century derision of sentimentality, moral earnestness and melodrama in popular fiction by women ignores the importance of these conventions and their role in ‘expressing and shaping the social context that produced them’. The reappraisal has also involved moving beyond the potentially reductive assumption that ‘the non canonical text must be legitimated as subversive in order to be considered worthy of study’. Critics of non-canonical fiction are now beginning to assess women writers outside the
literary mainstream on their own merits, rather than simply as unadventuresome imitators of their better-known contemporaries.22

This new collection, Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction, continues the process of rediscovering this lost body of writing by nineteenth-century women. The intention has been to provide further insight into the wealth and variety of women’s fiction in mid-Victorian Britain whilst offering new readings and new perspectives on some of the most popular and influential novelists of the period. Some of the writers featured here will probably be familiar to students and readers of the Victorian novel. Ellen [Mrs Henry] Wood has retained some renown on account of the revival of interest in her 1861 best-seller East Lynne and its theatrical adaptations. However none of the other forty-five works of this writer reckoned by one contemporary, Adeline Sergeant, to have obtained ‘more popularity than any novelist of the Victorian age’, are in print.23 This series seeks to remedy something of this by re-issuing one of Wood’s most powerful novels, St Martin’s Eve (1866). In addition the current project re-introduces five other novels and novelists, whose careers and achievements have become even more obscure: Florence Marryat (Love’s Conflict (1865)), Felicia Skene (Hidden Depths (1866)), Rhoda Broughton (Cometh up as a Flower (1867)), Mary Cecil Hay (Old Myddleton’s Money (1876)) and Dora Russell (Beneath the Wave (1878)). Although information on some of these women is very scarce – little is known about the personal life of Dora Russell and hardly anything about that of Mary Cecil Hay – all became household names in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The collection brings together novels which are representative of their writers and which indicate their versatility; novels that are powerful, experimental or revisionary, which are distinctive but yet have some common subjects, themes and concerns.

The Sensation Novel

What links all the writers contained in this new collection is their contribution to the phenomenon of the sub-genre of Victorian fiction labelled the ‘sensation’ novel which began to proliferate in the 1860s. As the title and contents of this new series indicate, there were various kinds of sensation novel and to talk of sensation fiction as though it were all of a single type or of equal merit would be misleading. Broadly speaking, however, sensation fiction was a form of fiction which took its label from the contemporary theatre’s ‘sensation drama’ and the accompanying displays of intense emotion and physical spectacle this encompassed. It offered readers a cultural fusion of different kinds of popular forms, drawing not only on the techniques of popular melodrama, but on the earlier ‘Newgate’ tales of crime and villainy, broadsheet literature, newspaper reports of criminal trials and divorce cases, as well as the Gothic novel which flourished in the 1790s and early 1800s.
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Like the Gothic novel, the sensation novel showed the terrifying eruption of the grotesque and the monstrous – demonic females, doubles, taboo desires, subterranean spaces – all packaged together in an exciting narrative. However, sensation novels differ from late-eighteenth-century manifestations of the Gothic novel in which the sinister is located in an exotic location far away. Instead they describe criminal or horrible events taking place in a ‘recognisable everyday reality’, revealing what Henry James famously termed ‘those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors … infinitely the more terrible’.  

That this was central to the effectiveness of these works was a point made by Henry Mansel, writing in the Quarterly Review in 1863:

[A] tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting … The man who shook our hand with a hearty English grasp half an hour ago – the woman whose beauty and grace were the charm of last night … how exciting to think that under these pleasing outsides may be concealed some demon in human shape, a Count Fosco or a Lady Audley! (see this volume, p. 38).

In this regard the sensation novel was also seen as a riposte to the dominance of the domestic novel (‘domestic’ being, as the novelist Charles Reade suggested, a euphemism for ‘tame’). Sensation novelists were seen to be wresting the three-volume novel into dangerous new shapes, transporting murder, adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, madness and sexual deviance into the private confines of the drawing room. ‘Society is a vast magazine of crime and suffering, of enormities, mysteries, and miseries of every description, of incidents, in a word’ was Henry James’s observation of these dark ‘unhealthy’ novels, which described a Britain full of sinister possibilities, at the same time as they exposed the dark secrets behind the respectable surface. Blackmail, kidnapping, bigamy, impersonation, abduction, madness, fraud and murder among apparently respectable members of the middle and upper classes are central components. Prominent too are servants, watching and sometimes blackmailing their employers. Other novels are less crime-filled, but focus in uncomfortable ways on the problematics of shifting identities, of unstable sexual desires, marriage and divorce, of inconvenient wives (and indeed husbands) locked away, and of homes in which violence, or the possibility of violence, is always lurking. As Elaine Showalter notes:

In these novels the death of a husband or wife comes as a welcome release, and spouses who lack the friendly agency of typhoid find desperate remedies in flight, divorce or ultimately murder. ‘Jane Eyre’s Mr Rochester!’ exclaimed a sensation heroine in 1861. ‘If I had been Jane Eyre, I would have killed him!’
Behind the smooth façade of home and family, it was suggested, jealous passion and madness fester and threaten even the most comfortable of domestic situations.

The best-known sensation novels were Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1861), Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). They were (and still are) credited with having ‘exploded’ on Victorian novel readers ‘like a bombshell’ in the 1860s. It is slightly questionable whether 1860s Victorian readers and critics were struck by the newness of these novels as forcefully as recent critics like to think. There is evidence that some of the plots were regarded as rather ‘old hat’. Nor were these novels the first to be given the ‘sensation’ label. Nonetheless these three works were enormously successful and were seen by some observers to have sparked a new fashion in writing. ‘Now we have sensation mania’, lamented a writer for the *Westminster Review* in 1866. ‘Its virus is spreading in all directions from the penny journal to the shilling magazine and from the shilling magazine to the thirty-shillings volume’ (see this volume, p. 157). The recent revival of interest in Collins, Braddon, and to a lesser extent Wood, has ensured that new editions of these three iconic novels have appeared and as they have continued to be read and enjoyed by new generations of readers and then put on college and university syllabuses, so the map of Victorian literature has been slightly redrawn. It is now acknowledged that if sensation fiction is cut out of the picture it is impossible to gain an accurate sense of nineteenth-century literary historiography and of what the Victorian novel meant to the Victorians, not only the reading public but also in terms of cross-influences between writers, as well as our knowledge of the development of mass market and formula fiction. Sensation fiction and the critical furore it provoked is now seen as a key event in the nineteenth century, involving some of the wider cultural and social preoccupations of the mid-Victorian period as well as enriching our understanding and interpretation of Victorian fiction generally.

However, as this revisionist work has continued at a rapid pace, it has quickly outrun the readily available resources. Whilst the revivals of Collins and Braddon are well underway, the fact that very few sensation novels by their contemporaries are in print today has made it extremely difficult to assess the genre’s true place in the history and development of the novel. This series attempts to remedy this. It maps out some of this vast unexplored hinterland of literary endeavour, re-introducing works by once-recognizable names to a twenty-first century audience, and helping to set in motion the next stage of research into sensation fiction by Victorian women. Of course, by its very nature, any series of reprints dealing with such a rich and multivalent form as the sensation novel can only offer a slice of the many different kinds of writing the genre encompassed. This collection is no exception. It is partial (in both senses of the term), and the various domestic, gothic, polem-
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ical, erotic, detective fictions offered here are intended to whet the reader’s appetite. What it does try to indicate is that, although ‘sensation mania’ is typically labelled as an 1860’s phenomenon (a fact reflected in the dates of some of the novels here), the sensation novel cannot be contained tidily within a single decade. The literary developments frequently attributed to Collins, Braddon and Wood et al began before 1860 but they also continued after 1870. The genre continued in various formats for the rest of the century (the three-volume novel, the local newspaper, the cheap magazine), merging as it always had done with other modes of writing including the detective story and the ‘New Woman’ novel. Two later examples of sensation fiction by Mary Cecil Hay and Dora Russell are included here.

One of the reasons why these ‘other’ sensation novelists and many of their contemporaries remain hidden from view is that data is widely dispersed across periodicals, catalogues and publishers’ lists. This volume of the collection brings together information from these different sources to construct an annotated bibliography of sensation fiction 1855–90, which can be taken as a starting point for further study of individual authors and of the mid-Victorian literary field more generally. At the same time many significant contributions to the Victorian controversies surrounding the nature of sensation fiction and of reading practices, as played out in impassioned articles in the periodical press, have been almost entirely neglected. Again, many scholars find it difficult to access this material first hand and are dependent on what others have written about these key documents. Under the heading ‘Sensation and the Sensation Debate’ this volume also reprints important but difficult-to-find contemporary articles on all aspects of the sensation debate by literary critics, moralists, psychologists and the clergy, helping the reader to view the novels in context.

The other volumes of this series contain reissues of six novels. This is a small selection, but a revealing one. The novels and their writers raise a number of important questions about the virtual disappearance from literary history of a particular body of fiction by women. They also, if we use successful fiction as an index to the historical climate that produced it, offer valuable insights into the tastes, interests and concerns of the contemporary reading public. As Sally Mitchell points out ‘the popular emotional novel gratifies common needs of readers, who find them nowhere else so enticingly and compellingly expressed’. So much so that several twentieth-century critics working on modern mass cultures, such as the soap opera and the romantic novel, have come to the same conclusions about the appeal of these forms as their nineteenth-century counterparts did, namely that part of the impact of popular texts stems from the links that readers and audience make with their own desires. Valerie Pedlar has described how the sensation novel, in particular, ‘drew on the reader’s own experience of life and invited a thrilling involvement that high minded commentators felt was not quite
commensurate with moral standards'. However, as Lillian Nayder notes, in her introduction to *Hidden Depths*, what made sensation fiction especially dangerous was that it put unspoken and unsanctioned desires into words and provided ‘an alternative vision in which moral codes and social norms can be questioned and inverted’ (Volume 4, p. xii). It took readers out of the confines of their everyday lives and offered them a glimpse of what things might be.

As the contemporary reviews and articles included in this volume indicate, the sensation novel, or the ‘enigma’ or ‘bigamy’ novel as it was sometimes labelled, got a very mixed press. There were some critical encomiums for the genre’s boldness, its plots and the entertainment it offered. But more often, as Lillian Nayder notes in her introduction, sensationalism tended to be seen either as ‘an undisciplined “addiction’’ or as ‘an artful literary mode’ (Volume 4, p. xi). Its indebtedness to older forms of popular entertainment led to its being seen as a retrograde form which ‘undermined the hard-won respectability of the Victorian novel’.

In a seminal article ‘What is “Sensational” about the “Sensation” novel?’, Patrick Brantlinger has suggested that the sensation novel prompted nothing less than ‘a crisis in the history of literary realism’. The *London Quarterly Review* called it an ‘insult offered to the moral sense and feeling of the community’ in 1864 (see this volume, p. 78). Others denounced the genre a vulgar, bastard ‘species’ and it was condemned from the pulpit in a widely-reported speech by the Archbishop of York in November 1864 for seeming to glorify crime rather than teaching moral lessons *pace* Eliot and Trollope (see this volume, pp. 115–19). The Dean of St Paul’s, Henry Mansel, author of a long review of twenty-four sensation novels that appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in 1863, believed that the modern Victorian age itself was one of sensation and excess, characterized by a love of cheap thrills and unhealthy excitements. He suggested that these fictions were nothing less than ‘indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply’ (see this volume, p. 33).

Indeed, this idea that there was something poisonous or contaminatory about the spawning of these brutal narratives, that they were the offspring of the debilitating influence of modern commercial culture and working-class culture, informs a great deal of Victorian criticism. Sensation fiction was seen as dirty and dangerous; its readers as deluded and weak-minded. In the *Athenaeum*, Geraldine Jewsbury, a critic whose views represent a useful barometer of conservative middle-brow Victorian taste used a familiar metaphor when she described this kind of fiction ‘as fantastic and unwholesome as the smoke which curls up from the puffing pipe of the smoker of hashish’. In 1866, the *Saturday Review* reckoned ‘the purely didactic or religious novel' favoured by the likes of Dinah Mulock and Charlotte M. Yonge to
have become ‘virtually obsolete’ (this volume, p. 152). It had been ousted by a new impulse based on a powerful ‘wave of materialism’ and the evident delight taken by women novelists in scampering down to Bow Street and the Divorce Court for their inspirations, Patrick Brantlinger has noted ‘the direct relation between the sensation novel and sensation journalism’ and this idea that newspapers and cause célèbres provided the plots of sensation novels (or ‘newspaper novels’ as they were sometimes called) was one of the charges levied against them.38

Other Victorian critics discussing the sensation novel drew attention to the unstable and seemingly ambiguous moral messages in certain novels and the way in which these writings blurred the distinction between right and wrong. The Christian Remembrancer evoked the spectres of Darwinism, venereal disease and drug addiction when it accused women practitioners of ‘drugging thought and reason … stimulating the attention through the lower and more animal instincts … tampering with things evil and infringing more or less on the confines of wrong’ (this volume, p. 107). Such fears of disorderly conduct were never far from view when hostile critics discussed the sensation novel, not least because the want of restraint attributed to its shallow writers and equally shallow readers – especially, if as was widely believed they were mostly women – seemed to mark a dangerous falling away from the norms of bourgeois self-control. Immorality and excess, ‘morbid feelings and overwrought sensibilities’39 were often listed as the dominant themes of this brand of fiction and the frisson it was believed to excite in readers was a sure sign of cultural decline. The emergence, in the 1870s and 1880s, of a second generation of novelists, some of whom were prepared to take a more daring position on sexual licentiousness in the suburbs and the sexual double standard in a blatant effort to achieve a succès de scandale added to this sense of moral standards being blurred. By 1882, the Athenaeum announced itself weary of ‘our lady novelists … who try to attract their public by describing what they imagine to be “life” … dwelling on sins which they presumably know only at second hand … [and] select brainless ruffians and shameless harlots as their ideals of manhood and womanhood’.40 By this stage such representations were well established as fundamental to the sensation novelists’ strategies but for many critics they remained deeply disturbing.

Although sensation novels offered empathy, titillation and entertainment and the chance to live vicariously through the transgressions and adventures of others, they were also noted for their topicality.41 In 1863, Henry Mansel noted how these novels offered ‘close representations of events passing around us’ and he cited as an example the way in which Mathilda Houston’s 1862 novel, Such Things Are, seemed to be based on ‘the Road murder and the Glasgow poisoning’ (this volume, p. 47). This was a reference to the cases of Madeleine Smith, daughter of a Glasgow architect, accused of murdering her lover with arsenic, and Constance Kent, fifteen-year old daughter
of a customs official suspected of stabbing her three-year old brother to death before hiding his body in the family privy. Recent critics have also noted some of the ways in which sensation fiction appears to be ‘riddled with details which recall widely reported criminal occurrences of the time’. But what is also apparent is that the instability of meanings, signs and metaphors in the sensation novel suggests the genre’s centrality within the history of more generalized mid-late Victorian fears and ideas. Recent work by Lyn Pykett, John Sutherland, Nicholas Rance, Winifred Hughes, Jonathan Loesberg and Nicholas Daly has been influential in setting a precedent for viewing sensation fiction from the perspective of wider social, economic and political contexts. The range of these is extensive: bigamy, degeneration, lawlessness, financial fraud and/or ruin, marriage, adultery, divorce, the sexual double-standard, homosexuality, alcoholism, prostitution, the use and abuse of authority within the family. The sensation novel’s interest in class relations and disintegrating or shifting identities forms the part of an very important article by Jonathan Loesberg, who situates the genre in the context of the contemporary debate over the 1867 Reform Bill. By this time, madness also, as Lyn Pykett explains in her introduction to St Martin’s Eve, ‘had come to be identified as a peculiar preoccupation of the sensation novel, both as a means of achieving sensation effects and as a subject. Sensation novelists … were interested (to an unhealthy degree according to some reviewers) in exploring the social production and construction of madness: what made people mad, what society labelled as madness, and how madness and mad people were treated’ (Volume 3, p. xviii). Read alongside these contexts, the maniacs, the doppelgangers, the bestial people, the crooked lawyers, the sexually aggressive, rebellious women of these novels begin to take on new dimensions, emerging, as part of a very topical ‘literature of terror’, one which plugs into a shared sense of social anxiety and social conflict, at the same time as its authors suggest ways of managing it.

One very obvious discursive context for sensation fiction is the urgency with which nineteenth-century writers continued to debate the issues surrounding the female and the feminine. The (re)emergence of the ‘The Woman Question’ in the 1860s, including questions and viewpoints about female emancipation, about a woman’s rights to education and professional training and to earning and keeping her own income and property, her ability to make her own decisions, her right to be recognized as an independent legal entity and British subject, her right to be able to petition for custody of her legitimate children, were seen by some as threats to the presumed stability of Victorian patriarchal culture. As Lynda Nead has noted, the construction of the separate spheres ideology around which so much of Victorian society had been founded ‘was part of a wider formation of class identity, nation and empire … International leadership and the domination of foreign competition were believed to depend directly on the existence of a
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stable domestic base and social stability'. But by the 1860s there was some feeling that modern woman, was, as Lyn Pykett puts it, 'in flight from motherhood, family responsibility and domestic existence'.

Sensation novelists were involved in exploring and in some cases encouraging this feeling. In an 1866 article entitled ‘Homicidal Heroines’, the Saturday Review wondered ‘In what strange grooves has feminine genius begun to travel?’ (see this volume, p. 147). What struck observers particularly was the way in which sensation novels appeared to be initiating the next generation of wives and mothers into a set of values which did not appear to be constrained by hegemonic institutions such as the family or the Church of England. ‘Formerly’, as the Broadway noted in 1868 ‘we respected and admired our wives and sisters all the more for their innocent ignorance on certain topics, and now the most rustic maiden of sixteen, may by a diligent perusal of the works of her literary sisters, attain an almost perfect knowledge of every vice that festers beneath the sun’ (see this volume, p. 220). Certainly it is clear that the genre could allow more adventurous representations of women’s lives and that these could also be used to quite subversive effect. Many of these representations help undermine, if they do not altogether demolish, the sanitized image of the passive, angelic and weak Victorian heroine. In the sensation novel the reader finds scheming murderers, psychotics, bigamists, amateur detectives, women who use their bodies as investments, who attempt to wheedle money out of gullible men, and women overwhelmed by their own sexuality. This assertion of control over their own bodies is one of the most striking aspects of the sensation novel’s heroines, epitomized most starkly in novels like Mathilda Houston’s Such Things Are, in which the heroine secretly arranges and survives an abortion, thus allowing her to take back control of her own sex life from the novel’s men.

Many reviewers claimed there was something fundamentally ‘unnatural’ about these spectacles of intransigent, rebellious women actively soliciting danger and the physical and mental assertion it involved. Others, like Eneas Sweetland Dallas, writing in 1866, thought it a breach not only of decorum but of Art itself:

The first object of the novelist is to get personages in whom we can be interested; the next is to put them in action. But when women are the chief characters, how are you to set them in motion? The life of women cannot well be described as a life of action. When women are thus put forward to lead the action of a plot, they must be urged into a false position. To get vigorous action they are described as rushing into crime and doing masculine deeds … the novelist finds that to make an effect he has to give up his heroine to bigamy, to murder, to child-bearing by stealth in the Tyrol, and all sorts of adventures which can only signify her fall. The very prominence of the position which women occupy in recent fiction
leads by a natural process to their appearing in a light which is not good. This is what is called sensation. It is not wrong to make a sensation; but if the novelist depends for his sensation upon the action of a woman, the chances are that he will attain his end by unnatural means. As June Sturrock has noted, Dallas’s observations, despite his use of “‘imper-sonal” masculine pronouns, apply mostly to women sensation novelists’. They are also typical in the way they revolve round the containment of women as writers. Dallas may have had in mind Hidden Depths, published in the same year, 1866. This ‘novel with a purpose’, as Justin MacCarthy labelled it, is virtually a guide-book to the problems of a woman who takes up rescue work with ‘fallen’ women, at the same time as it attacks the sexual double standards, and exposes the veneer of respectability with which seemingly upright English gentlemen coat themselves. The book goes on to include what are perhaps the most graphic depictions of brothels ever seen in nineteenth century fiction. A year later Rhoda Broughton’s depictions of female passion in Cometh up as a Flower and Not Wisely But Too Well brought her the label, ‘novelist of revolt’ from the Spectator. Ellen Wood, in St Martin’s Eve, poses some of the typical questions other novels of the time seek to answer: How is a woman to act when her husband fails to provide for their child? How far can a woman go in furthering her child’s interests? Is murder even justified? In Love’s Conflict are we to admire or censure the heroine, Elfrida Treherne, when she runs away from her cruel, abusive husband? Such questions are at the heart of many of these novels.

As is evident in the critical vocabularies of many of the reviews reprinted in this volume – in particular the liberal use of epithets ‘vulgar’, ‘coarse’, ‘unpleasant’ – some critics struggled to reconcile the novels given them with their preconceived image of ‘woman’. The Reverend Frederick Paget, in the ‘afterword’ to his very witty pastiche on the sensation novel Lucretia: The Heroine of the Nineteenth Century (1868), clung onto the hope ‘that no such women as many of the heroines of the true sensational novel have been rep-rented to be, have ever existed, – so unprincipled, so degraded, so wicked’ (see this volume, p. 217). In one sense Paget was picking up the baton dropped by Margaret Oliphant in an earlier article ‘Sensational Novels’, published in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1867, and which had provoked something of a furore (see this volume, pp. 8–15). Oliphant, who was not above using some of the devices of sensation fiction in her own novels, complained bitterly about the shameful way in which sensation novelists represented women to other women:

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshly and unlovely record. Women driven wild with love for the man who leads them onto desperation … women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion, women who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and
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homes they hate … such are the heroines who have been imported into modern fiction.

Oliphant’s criticism does not simply rest on the blurred moral message offered in these works but by her conviction that the ‘eagerness of physical sensation … represented as the natural sentiment of English girls’ and ‘offered to them … as a true representation of themselves’ was not only dangerous but psychologically incorrect. Sensation novels contained events and expressed emotions about which a proper lady would know nothing. Oliphant grasps the mood of these novels rather well but cannot countenance it. As Tamar Heller notes in her discussion of Cometh Up as a Flower, Oliphant sees such works as ‘a catalyst for a chain reaction of feminine moral contagion: a female author creates a female narrator whose adulterous yearnings infect female readers who are seduced by “the intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation”’ (Volume 4, p. xxxiv).

Part of the challenge for readers of a collection of this kind will be to judge whether there are any particular qualities in these fictions that mark them as obviously written by women. Is there a sense of continuity, of shared ideas and themes, expressed in these novels by women which will allow them to be restored to what Nancy K. Miller has termed ‘a poetics of location’?

It is certainly true of the novels reprinted here that we see women writing women. Published in a decade when the Athenaeum noted in 1866 ‘the ideas of women on point of morals and ethics seem in a state of transition, and consequently of confusion’ both Florence Marryat and Rhoda Broughton explore, with what R. C. Terry has described as an ‘uninhibited directness’, the sexual arousal and longing, betrayal and abuse on the part of unmarried and married women. Ellen Wood begins St Martin’s Eve with characters worrying about inherited insanity and the laws of primogeniture which disadvantage women. As all these novels remind us, fiction was one of the few places where women could speak publicly, albeit indirectly, of women’s experiences; expressing their nightmares and their aspirations, and trying to escape the pharaic attitude which saw women as angel or whore.

What the editors of the six novels reprinted have tried to do is to recognize some of the complexities of these examples of women’s writing, specifically, the ways in which, to quote Nicola Thompson, ‘Novels by Victorian women writers tend to be melting pots of ideological conflict and exploration of attitudes towards women’s nature and role, full of the dialogic interplay of voices that Bakhtin identifies as central to the novel’s genre’. As noted earlier, this recognition is important for the study of women’s writing more generally because it is a way of moving beyond the confines of what one of the editors here, Lyn Pykett, has termed ‘the conservative radical dilemma’ where writers are dismissed for being insufficiently ‘feminist’, failing to provide role models of self-fulfilment and strong images of women.
The six women novelists – Marryat, Wood Skene, Broughton, Hay and Russell – are clearly aware in these novels of sexual differences and the cultural, economic and legal constraints which could curtail women’s lives. These contexts are highlighted by the volume editors, with the result that the collective account of Victorian women’s writing offered here includes some of the external events and factors which had an effect on literary production. It should not be assumed, however, that these novelists were outspoken proto-feminists. Even at their most widely escapist and emotionally thrilling all the novels reproduced here can be said to be very much of their time, and none of their writers could afford to undermine mythologies of womanhood completely, unless they were willing to risk antagonizing the circulating libraries and losing sections of their readership. Few mid-Victorian novelists were more respectable than Ellen [Mrs Henry] Wood who, in spite of those critics who wished to hold her personally responsible for the rise of the sensation novel, was celebrated by the *Pall Mall Gazette* as a ‘good Englishwoman of strong domestic tastes’, thus marking her out as a bastion of middle-class mores. Indeed, Wood’s devoted son Charles hit back at his mother’s critics, asserting that his mother’s aim in writing had been to counter what he described as a ‘vicious tendency’.

Wood however, is not only the woman writer negotiating these ‘parallel currents’ as Linda Peterson has termed them. None of the writers reprinted here are feminists, as we might understand the term today. They partake of the ‘didactic vision’ that characterizes a good deal of Victorian fiction. All are tremendously class conscious, and sometimes racist. Slaughter in the name of Queen and Country is presented in *Love’s Conflict* as a ‘good’ thing, and it is interesting to compare Marryat’s slant with the less approving gloss put on the ‘heroes’ of Indian Mutiny in Skene’s *Hidden Depths*. In *Old Myddelton’s Money* the staid heroine Honor Craven undergoes a series of challenges focused around her self-abnegation and faithfulness to her friends and family and emerges triumphant. As Mark Knight notes, these ‘trials’ are part of the novel’s moral purpose, and part of ‘a divine test’ of character which makes Honor a suitable role model for the novel’s readers. In his discussion of Dora Russell’s *Beneath the Wave*, Graham Law likewise notes Dora Russell’s missionary ‘appeals to the reader’ (Volume 6, p. xviii). Like many other sensation novels, these texts can often appear conservative in their conclusions, promoting current ideologies and prevailing values. The ambitious heroine must be punished for threatening patriarchal order in her bid for power, property or sex. Despite the emergence of campaigns for careers and training to be given to women, notably by the Society for the Promotion of Employment for Women founded in 1859, men and marriage are the reference points by which most of the novels reprinted here are organized. *Old Myddelton’s Money* concludes with a marriage; *Love’s Conflict* and *Cometh up as a Flower* focus on the married woman; *Beneath the Wave* throws the spot-
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light on the abandoned wife and the adulteress. St Martin’s Eve, as Lyn Pykett notes, is a novel which gives ‘attention to the social position of women and the ways in which they are disposed of in marriage’ (Volume 3, p. xiv). Taken together these novels remind us that sensation fiction by women is often about the importance of the institution of marriage for women and how they do or do not adapt to the kind of existence it entails.

The (re)assessment of popular writers offered here has also been facilitated by research into the conditions of the literary marketplace. The writers featured, with their long histories with firms like Bentley and Son, the Tinsleys and Hurst & Blackett and frequent work for other publishers and magazines, make them prime subjects for scholars interested in the business of authorship and publishing. Whilst interviews and reminiscences like Helen Black’s Notable Women Authors of the Day and Pen, Pencil, Baton and Mask leave the impression that women writers spent most of their time in household management and were reliant on the apparently disinterested patronage of a chivalrous literary ‘godfather’ like the Georges Routledge or Bentley, their extensive correspondence suggests, as nothing else can, that they were far from being diffident and out of the world. Lyn Pykett notes Ellen Wood’s ‘extraordinary industriousness and professionalism’ (Volume 3, p. x), a description which applies equally well to Florence Marryat, Felicia Skene and Rhoda Broughton. As Graham Law has demonstrated, the archives of Tillotson & Son of Bolton, owners of the powerful ‘Fiction Bureau’, which cover the period from 1873 to the 1890s, reveal an equally meticulous concern about career and money on the part of Dora Russell, Mary Cecil Hay and Mary Braddon, amongst many others.

Though the work of recovering women writers’ positions within the ‘literary field’ (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase) has really only just started, the descriptions of the careers of the writers featured here confirms that this is an extremely fruitful area for investigation. Financial negotiations with publishers like the Tinsleys or John Maxwell, novelists’ responses to the comments of publishers’ readers such as Geraldine Jewsbury, and the editorship by women of mainstream journals including the Argosy, Belgravia, St James’s Magazine, and London Society reveal a good deal about the business of fiction in the mid-Victorian period and the power exerted by certain women. It has long been believed that women novelists occupied a subservient position in the literary field. However this assumption is now being opened up for debate. In a recent discussion of women, fiction and the marketplace, Valerie Sanders refutes such claims as one-dimensional, arguing that women had more control over their own professional writing and were able to ‘reject modes of publication they found uncongenial’. She argues that ‘women novelists, who had begun the century in apologetic mode, ended it, to a considerable extent, calling the shots … Writers that we now regard as “canonical” struggled for recognition, whilst those since relegated to minor
status seem to have exploited the marketplace on a scale that relatively few novelists achieve even today".60

The careers of the writers included here, together with contemporary commentary on them, certainly seem to support Sanders’s contention that women’s capacity to ‘exploit the marketplace’ was considerable. Some male novelists felt seriously threatened. Charles Reade (never a fan of women’s writing) complained that the circulating libraries would ‘only take in ladies’ novels – Mrs Henry Wood, Ouida, Miss Braddon – these are their gods’.61 Increasingly in an expanding publishing industry dominated by increasingly sophisticated promotional strategies, novelists like Ellen Wood, ‘Ouida’, Florence Marryat and Rhoda Broughton allowed both name and works to be transformed into tradable commodities. Wood, in particular, wielded a good deal of power. It was always ‘Mrs Henry Wood’ never Ellen Wood. She was, as she told Richard Bentley, ‘particular that the Christian name (Henry) is [always] inserted’.62 Such instructions have been seen to reveal Wood’s innate conservatism, but they also suggest that Wood’s own identity as a writer was created as consciously as those of her characters. In 1878, the Athenaeum confirmed how new editions of her novels were ‘demanded almost before the library labels can have had time to dry on the backs of the first’.63 This awareness of her market appeal, encouraged by what George Bentley cautiously referred to as a ‘strong confidence’ in her own work64 encouraged Wood to play her publishers off against one another in a manner which could be read as ruthless opportunism but which her friend, Henrietta Keddie, described as a determination ‘not to find herself in the cold when her opportunities came to an end’. Keddie went on to draw a comparison between Wood (‘sensible and patient’) and the ‘wild extravagance and self-indulgence’ of Ouida for whom literary success brought increasing notoriety for her extravagant lifestyle and the careless management of her personal finances.65 It has been claimed that Wood, who from the evidence of her letters seems to have been capable of squeezing her publishers quite tightly, regularly earned as much as £5–6,000 a year from her writings.66 It was to Wood’s income that Wilkie Collins enviously referred in 1872 in his own negotiations with Smith, Elder, claiming that he knew she averaged £1,000 a year by the sale of her novels in six shilling editions.67

Of course, not every sensation novelist was as successful as Wood, Marryat or Broughton; as Graham Law shows in his discussion of Dora Russell’s career, many lived precarious existences. These examples, too, suggest that there is a good deal still to be learnt about the literary and economic milieu in which popular fiction was produced and consumed. There is a need to be aware that for most of these women writing was a form of labour, that publishing their books was a business and that the shape of their novels was marked by these material facts. It is important to note as well the envy and vilification which successful careers could provoke on the part of those who
believed themselves better qualified on account of their sex or education. The Pall Mall Gazette’s 1870 article ‘Peculiarities of Some Female Novelists’ is particularly striking for the way in which it places these breathtakingly energetic women into a kind of literary underworld. They are equated with other public women of the ‘lowest’ type – prostitutes ‘becoming more aggressive and more brazen every month, until it is hard to conjecture at what point they will be content to stop’ (this volume, p. 228). The same review then goes on to absorb their achievements with those of other ‘loose’ (in both senses of the word) women – in noting how the sensation novelists have been praised for their audacity, just as the grace and agility of those women have been praised who expose themselves in “tights” at the theatres and music-halls’ the reviewer turns their achievements into vulgar circus tricks (this volume, pp. 228–9). Although the reviewer’s own performance might be summed up as little more than a shaky display of masculine authority, it makes its point well enough. In a world where rapid production was associated with promiscuity, writers as prolific and successful as Ellen Wood, Annie Thomas, Mary Braddon, Florence Marryat, Rhoda Broughton and ‘Ouida’ were prime targets for public opprobrium. Critics could control anxieties about their influence by fixing them within popular misogynistic models. It helped that the lives of some of these women also provided opportunities for snide comments about sexual error. Critics (male and female) could invoke the vision of the female sensation novelist as a strong-minded woman of dubious morals.

To sum up, the volumes included in Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction pursue these themes – sensation, gender, authorship, the marketplace, popular culture – as key elements of Victorian literary culture, and of the history of the novel more generally. The novels are discussed in terms of the wider contexts of the development of nineteenth-century women’s writing. The volume editors also examine the ways in which these popular writers revised and rewrote the narratives of their more well-known contemporaries. Tamar Heller considers Rhoda Broughton’s reworkings of George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss and Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights and the ‘revision of traditional plots for women, especially the courtship and marriage plot so central to the history of the domestic novel’ (Volume 4, p. xxxv). Lyn Pykett considers ways in which in sensation fiction ‘Gothic is modernized and domesticated’ (Volume 3, p. xv). Others focus more on revisions of specific novels, with Mark Knight detailing some of the ‘echoes’ of Jane Eyre in Old Myddleton’s Money, and Graham Law noting the ‘surface similarities’ between Dora Russell’s Beneath the Wave and Mary Braddon’s An Open Verdict (1878), prompting him to conclude ‘one must suspect that Russell was reading Braddon’s instalments while the ideas for her new work were incubating’ (Volume 6, p. xv).
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The woman writer’s ability to manipulate generic conventions also underpins the first novel reprinted here: Florence Marryat’s Love’s Conflict (Volume 2). The introduction considers some of the different literary ingredients of the novel, a work drawing on Marryat’s experiences as the wife of an army office stationed in British India, identifying various generic discourses – domestic realism, temperance fiction, conduct books, travel writing and the moralistic ethos of ‘self help’ which features in so many Victorian texts. Marryat’s writing also represents a development in what critics have labelled ‘domestic sensationalism’, that aspect of sensation fiction often associated with women writers and which locates its action in familiar everyday settings (as opposed to ‘newspaper sensationalism’, inspired by reports in the press and associated with male authors like Collins, Reade and Dickens). In a similar vein, Lyn Pykett suggests that a closer examination of Ellen Wood’s St Martin’s Eve reveals a similar blending of genres, ‘a hybrid novel which combines the sensational, the sentimental and the domestic, with a dash of social comedy’ (Volume 3, p. xiii). Although discussions of the sensation novel have tended to place Wood together with Collins and Braddon, Pykett draws attention to some of the differences between Wood and her fiercest rivals, noting, for example how Wood ‘eschews those devices for prolonging suspense and secrecy that Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon perfected’. Whilst ‘Collins tends to avoid a single authoritative narrative voice, and Braddon’s narrators gloss over events and maintain strategic silences in order to give nothing away, Wood opts for a reassuringly gossipy female narrator, who constantly prepares the reader for later events’. The tone of this narrator may be one reason why Wood’s novels often appeared less threatening to critics than those of Collins and Braddon since, as Pykett points out, it ‘seems to belong more to the domestic novel than it does to the sensation novel’ (Volume 3, p. xxi). Both these first two introductory essays show women writers’ reluctance to be bound by single generic models and their utilization of different fictional forms.

The hybridity of sensation fiction and the difficulty in classifying it is also one of the messages emerging from Lillian Nayder’s discussion of Felicia Skene’s polemical Hidden Depths. Through an examination of the neglected genre of Tractarian fiction (other exponents included Charlotte Yonge and Elizabeth Sewell), Nayder shows how Skene brings ‘a moral and spiritual purpose to sensation fiction’, extending ‘the moral boundaries of sensation fiction, using it to convey an orthodox Christian message’ (Volume 4, p. xii) at the same time as ‘the sensational mode allows her to overstep the social and political confines of Tractarian fiction’. Skene’s message, written in the wake of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 and 1866, legislation designed to safeguard soldiers against venereal disease by subjecting women believed to be prostitutes to examination and detention, is that society must resist the double standard and women like Annie and Ernestine ‘are clearly
justified in resenting and resisting their lot' (Volume 4, p. xviii). As well as challenging traditional portrayals of prostitutes as depraved, Skene also engages with woman’s entry into the public sphere, showing how strong Tractarian consciences gave women writers the confidence ‘to become preachers of a sort, quoting from and glossing the Bible’ and showing approval of women who ‘enter into public affairs in the cause of religion’, despite the condemnation and derision this might provoke (Volume 4, p. xiii). As Nayder demonstrates, the strategies adopted by Skene including the adoption of an assumed name or using no signature at all, are crucial to further understanding the contradictory ways in which women writers entered into public discourse.

The final three volume editors situate their examples of the sensation novel within the contexts of the heroines of popular fiction and the literary marketplace. Tamar Heller highlights the bravery of Rhoda Broughton’s achievement in *Cometh up as a Flower*, the fact that ‘a Victorian, accomplishes what Virginia Woolf, in “Professions for Women”, identified as an impossible task even for herself, a modernist woman writer, “telling the truth about my own experiences as a body”’ (Volume 4, p. xxxiv). In her discussion of the novel’s narrator, Nell Lestrange, Heller highlights the novel’s ‘strategy’ for representing female sexuality, in particular the way which ‘[t]hrough an extravagant pastiche of allusions to earlier literary works and conventional ways of telling women’s stories, Broughton draws attention to the generic instability of her own narrative of female desire’ (Volume 4, p. xxxv). Mark Knight’s introduction to Mary Cecil Hay’s *Old Myddelton’s Money* highlights some of the changes to form and publication which took place in the 1870s, specifically the ways in which some novelists like Hay ‘adapted sensational narratives to a more restrained style that enabled them to sell to the domestic market without encountering the sort of controversy endured by their predecessors’ (Volume 5, p. viii). Other critics have given explanations for this perceptible shift but they have not analysed in quite the same detail. Knight argues that in Hay’s case, it had much to do with the context in which her work was serialized, namely the *Family Herald: A Domestic Magazine of Useful Information and Amusement*, a weekly periodical launched in 1842. The domesticated and conservative accents of this magazine, with its emphasis on ‘carrying usefulness and instruction everywhere’, are not ones that we immediately associate with sensation fiction but, like Ellen Wood, who wrote for ultra-respectable, religious magazines like *Good Words* and *The Quiver*, Hay was seen to offer a less morally ambiguous form of sensationalism than many of her contemporaries. A writer for whom ‘words were a commodity to be sold from one publisher to another and reused in different formats’ she was seen to be quite capable of ‘curbing’ her sensational impulses, as she does in *Old Myddelton’s Money*. Commenting on the way in which the detective narrative of this novel becomes less central as the novel progresses, and is
replaced by a more conventional domestic story of courtship and marriage, Knight explains that what this highlights is ‘just how far the generic qualities of detective fiction had become embedded in popular thought by the mid-1870s’. As with Hidden Depths sensational techniques are deployed for religious ends, but as Knight notes, in a more comfortable way. ‘The dramatic incidents and spectacles that we find in Hay’s work are made to serve a providential purpose rather than functioning as an end in themselves’ (Volume 5, p. xi). This mixture of sacred and secular caused less controversy than might have been expected, especially given the furore which had erupted over Good Word’s serializations of novels judged ‘sensational’ a decade earlier. Yet as Knight points out, by the 1870s, this ‘blurred territory between the sacred and the secular was integral to different parts of the periodical market at this time, and had been for several years’ (Volume 5, p. xii).

Graham Law’s introduction to Dora Russell’s Beneath the Wave (Volume 6) provides an analysis of the conditions of the marketplace and continues the examinations of the career paths of professional women writers begun in earlier volumes. Law uses the phrase ‘newspaper fiction’ to describe this example of the sensation novel, by which he does not mean ‘Newspaper Novel’, the label used by critics like Henry Mansel to refer to those male authors who rehashed (as he saw it) scandalous newspaper reports as the basis for their plots. Instead ““newspaper fiction” is a complex concept deriving from, but by no means narrowly limited to, the print context in which stories like Russell’s initially appeared – syndicates of cheap provincial weekly news miscellanies. In spite of their number and variety, these venues provide specific indications of the cultural identities of the communities of readers who constituted Russell’s principle audience – identities which can be charted in terms of regional, social, religious and political affiliations, as well as by gender’ (Volume 6, p. vii). As well as describing the negotiations which a self-supporting woman was required to undertake in this part of the literary field, Law notes the ways in which an author’s decision to syndicate fiction to papers with a large working-class readership impacted on form and content. In Beneath the Wave there is little sympathy for the adulterous Isabel Trevor, unlike her more famous namesake – Isabel Carlyle in Ellen Wood’s East Lynne. The working-classes are represented sympathetically, although class distinctions are carefully maintained. Speculating on the autobiographical elements of the novel, and the links between female author and heroine, Law also notes that ‘Russell’s stories abound with feckless widowers, whose sins are visited on dutiful daughters, who are thus forced to endure hardship and sacrifice romance – at least until the release of the happy ending’ (Volume 6, p. xvi). Whether Hilda Marston, heroine of Beneath the Wave, is a self-portrait is speculative, but certainly it seems as if Russell, like her heroine, found negotiating the demands of family, self and career difficult. Although the range of other novels examined here do not all fit so neatly into
this autobiographical model, certainly the essays broadly demonstrate that professional women writers in this period all had to contend with these 'parallel currents' in their own struggles for survival and recognition. These were wide-ranging writers, of more complexity than they have been given credit for; writers who were responsive to the social concerns of their times and to the conditions of the marketplace and whose work and careers can be approached through many frameworks. The novels reprinted here reveal that sensation fiction by women is a crucial part of the literary history of the nineteenth century; its reappraisal is long overdue.

NOTES

4. Ibid., p. 87.
5. Ibid., p. 21.
6. According to one version of literary history, the 1890s also saw an attempt by the literary intelligentsia to 'reclaim the kingdom of the English novel for male writers, male readers and men’s stories' as Elaine Showalter puts it. See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* (London, Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 142. For further discussion on this move, see also Rob Dixon, *Writing the Colonial Adventure* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 3–5.
8. Ibid.
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22. See Carol Poster, ‘Oxidization is a Feminist Issue: Acidity, Canonicity and Popular Victorian Female Authors’, College English, 20 (1996), pp. 515–29. Poster highlights the continuing invisibility of nineteenth-century popular writers and many of her insights apply to the novelists selected here. Like Felski, she suggests that, despite pioneering feminist criticism, ‘the tendency of such critics to search
the nineteenth century above all for models of proto-feminism has resulted in the omission of the recovery projects of novels incompatible with twentieth century feminism'.


29. As early as 1859 Jewsbury complained in the Athenaeum that ‘if there is a wedding it is ten to one but it is a bigamy’ (15 October 1859, p. 497); in 1860 she reprimanded Louisa Stewart for using the ‘questionable expedient’ device of having the supposedly-dead first wife return since ‘it has been so often used that one doubts whether it can carry an author safely much longer’ (25 February 1860, p. 268). Cited in Monica Fryckstedt, Geraldine Jewsbury’s Athenaeum Reviews (Uppsala, Studia Anglistica Uppsala, 1986), p. 76.

30. For example, the Saturday Review uses the label in its review of Caroline Clive’s Paul Feroll (1855), the story of an outwardly respectable man who has killed his wife and lives with the secret for many years. The novel’s representation of a virtuous murderer prompted accusations of immorality ([Unsigned Review], ‘Novels’, Saturday Review (12 January 1856), p. 192). As Charlotte Mitchell points out the ‘sensation novel was not yet the term of abuse it was to become in the next five years, but this attack foreshadows the accusations of moral irresponsibility soon to be aimed at Wilkie Collins, Mary Braddon and Ellen Wood. (‘Introduction’, Paul Feroll (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xi.

31. Readers will note that there are no novels by male writers reprinted, despite the fact that there are many examples of men’s contributions to Victorian sensation fiction. This absence of male writers is in no way to dismiss the rich and varied body of writing produced by men such as James Payn, Frank Barret, John Berwick Harwood, Charles Felix and William Russell. Examples of their works are listed in the bibliography of sensation fiction included in this volume.


34. For other discussions of the sensation debate see Hughes, The Maniac in the Cellar; Susan David Bernstein, ‘Dirty Reading: Sensation Fiction, Women and Primitivism’, Criticism, 36 (Spring 1994), pp. 200–17.
38. Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 9. See also the comments made by a reviewer for *The Reader* in respect of Frances Browne’s *The Hidden Sin* (1866): ‘We suppose “The Hidden Sin” will find readers among that class for whose edification “Bloody Murders”, “Mysterious Deaths”, “Frightful Accidents” and “Awful Explosions” are placarded by the cheap Sunday papers; and which, from the expensive form in which these sensational tales are now produced, we conclude is no longer confined to the uneducated’ ([Unsigned Review], ‘Novels’, *The Reader* (28 April 1866), p. 417).
40. [Unsigned Review], ‘Novels of the Week’, *Athenaeum* (7 January 1882), p. 15.
47. Ibid.
49. [Unsigned Review], ‘Novels’, *Spectator* (1 Oct 1867), p. 1173.
50. See Sturrock, ‘Murder, Gender, and Popular Fiction’, p. 84.
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57. Peterson, ‘Charlotte Riddell’s A Struggle for Fame’, p. 200.


63. [Unsigned Review], ‘New Novels’, Athenaeum (26 October 1878), p. 530.

64. George Bentley to Ellen Wood, 30 July 1863, Bentley Archives.


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INTRODUCTION

Sensation and the Sensation Debate

Of our contemporary school of lady novelists of the sensational kind, commencing with Miss Braddon and Mrs Henry Wood (whose earliest works already date more than a quarter of a century back), continuing with Mrs Riddell and Miss Rhoda Broughton, and culminating in the writer who calls herself ‘Ouida’, much need not be said. They have unquestionably acquired and perfected the art of enthralling the reader’s attention and keeping it captive: in that art less skilful, if more moral, writers might do well to take a lesson from them. In all or most of their books, the views of life are distorted, the whole atmosphere is oppressive and tainted, the sentiment false, the style tawdry and slipshod. As well might a reader pluck one of the poisonous fruits of French fiction (some 'scrofulous French novel', such as Mr Browning describes, and such as Westgate [character in the novel] snatched from Hebe’s hand and flung into the fire), as gather one from any of these trees, loaded with apples of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹

In the previous section it was suggested that the rise, fall and resurgence of interest in sensation fiction and the literary reputations of its most famous exponents represents many of the changes and fluctuations in literary taste that have taken place over the last one hundred and fifty years. The remainder of this volume, Sensationalism and the Sensation Debate, is designed to survey some of the major issues relating to sensation fiction as they emerged in the 1860s through to the early 1880s, around the time that the attack above by Richard Herne Shephard appeared. ‘[A]t no time were the techniques and subject-matter of fiction under more vigorous or more public debate’ notes David Skilton of this period.² The anthology of thirty-five extracts collected here is intended to allow twenty-first century readers to begin to trace a critical debate via examples of different kinds of Victorian literary criticism and patterns of ideas as circulated in the different printed media or from the lecture platform.

By its very nature, any anthology of criticism dealing with a sub-genre which provoked so much controversy can only offer a slice of the many different types of responses it elicited. This anthology is no exception and the different reviews, articles, satires and poems are intended to convey just something of the range of sources which are available. The articles in this new anthology are also designed to complement the essays featured in earlier
collections, notably Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage, edited by Norman Page (1974) and The Victorian Novel, edited by Francis O’Gorman (2002). In particular, by examining the three collections alongside one another, one can see something of the different ways in which the story of Victorian fiction has come to be read, including a progression from the evidence of the early anthologies where Collins is presented as the influential mainstay of the sensation novel (with women as competent, inferior imitators) to a wider, more inclusive stance that is assumed now that the importance of writing by women in the history of the novel has finally come to be recognized.

The construction of this anthology has been made easier by the fact that full-scale essays on the sensation novel appear in most of the best-known Victorian periodicals and newspapers. Sensation novelists could not claim to suffer from lack of notice; the literary editors were supplied with what they recognized as sensation fiction for more than thirty years, and in many cases they responded with a generous allocation of space, pressing into service a wide variety of reviewers. A whole sweep of critical responses, from E. S. Dallas, Richard Holt Hutton, Walter Besant and G. A. Sala down to anonymous journeymen were deployed. It is the aim of the present anthology to try to indicate something of the content of this dialogue, to pinpoint some of its main contributors and to see what consensus of opinion was reached, if any.

The criteria by which the works of the sensation novelists were criticized in the years covered in the present anthology were many and various. It is evident, for example, that many Victorian reviewers saw themselves as ‘cultural police responsible for protecting public standards’ as Nicola Thompson puts it in Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels. As Thompson notes, the critic could give a personal impressionistic approach but s/he also worked within a frame of reference which required them to ‘instruct’ (Walter Bagehot’s description) readers, to ‘instill in them the values of Victorian culture’ and ‘to prescribe and regulate critical value’. It was generally expected that a novel would instruct and entertain, and if possible have an ennobling influence, an expectation shared by many publishers and their readers (see Geraldine Jewsbury’s comments on Love’s Conflict in Volume 2 and the responses to Cometh up as a Flower detailed by Tamar Heller in Volume 4).

Critics had a number of other criteria by which they evaluated a novel. Thompson sums up the processes at work in the literary review in the following way:

The review, as a genre, has to place the literary work in a certain framework in order to come to terms with it; it has to label, name, and put the work in context before it can proceed to analyse and evaluate it. One of the ways in which this naming takes place is through definition of the ‘type’ of work it is; another way is through a comparison or juxtaposition
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of the reviewed works with other works. Analysis of these classifications and rhetorical modes helps reveal the reviewer's own aesthetic and ideological preconceptions, and provides insight into how both the contemporary critic and contemporary literary conventions process a new work.6

As will be seen, Thompson’s description, and her subsequent analysis of the ways in which the sex of an author led to particular expectations and frameworks being deployed as part of the ‘distinctly gendered aesthetics of reception’ sum up very well the processes at work in many of the reviews collected in this volume (and in the contemporary critical responses to individual novels discussed by the volume editors). Male and female novelists were often judged by different criteria, a point much in evidence in the Reader’s review of Henry Kingsley’s The Hillyars and the Burtons (1865). The reviewer, who is obviously an admirer of this hearty ‘masculine’ novelist, makes the following observations:

Regarded merely as novels, his productions are as exciting as the stories of bigamy and vulgar life which weekly proceed from the fluent pens of our popular lady novelists. But his novels deserve to be measured by a different standard than that which we apply to the rollicking stories at which our too unreserved and experienced authoresses are such adepts. These ladies are satisfied with showing how the commandments can be most ingeniously and pleasantly broken.7

Only a foolishly unobservant reader, the critic implies, would assume that Kingsley and his female rivals were really producing similar works.

Although recent critics have noticed and analysed the ways in which Victorian reviewers of the sensation novel fixate on what happens when the events depicted go beyond what is considered ‘normal’, the extracts included here help us locate the anxiety this produces with more precision. What readers will also notice is that the blueprint established for mid-Victorian literary criticism does not always work neatly for the sensation novel. Partly this has to do with the way in which the genre appeared ‘hydra headed’ to its critics,8 and the fact, as Winifred Hughes has noted, that it is ‘hard to define with any precision’.9 The sensation novel resisted the labelling which reviewers felt to be an important part of their role. Sampling the reviews it becomes evident that a number of very different kinds of novels could exist and co-exist but still be classified ‘sensational’. As has been noted, the choice of title for the present series ‘Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction’ is a very deliberate one. The six novels make us aware that different definitions of what constituted a sensation novel were, and indeed are, the result of positions being constantly formed and held, challenged and subverted. Alongside them, the articles reprinted in this volume serve as a reminder of the complex and often open-ended questions this body of work was capable of eliciting in its own day.
Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction: 1855–1890 – Volume 1

That there has always been and still remains a difficulty in ‘pinning’ down the sensation novel is evident in the way in which Victorian critics disagreed about which novelists should be labelled sensationalists. Was Dickens a sensation novelist as some claimed after reading Great Expectations and Edwin Drood? Was Ellen Wood? Despite her pretensions to refinement, Wood’s stories of disturbed, unbalanced people doing grotesque things, prompted the Athenaeum to label her rather than Collins, the ‘originator and chief of the sensation school of English novelists’ (1 October 1864, p. 428). The influence of Wood should not be underestimated and her stories were capable of making critics near-apoplectic with rage. Yet in other discussions of her work Wood was placed under the category of ‘Slow Lady Novelists’ (Reader (8 July 1865), pp. 30–1), viewed as a peculiarly fortifying and wholesome writer producing a different kind of fiction from that of her ‘fast’ rival Mary Braddon.

Another novelist who confused critics was ‘Ouida’ [Marie Louise de la Ramée], who wrote wildly popular love stories set in the exotic regions of aristocratic high life. Ouida’s feverish and fantastic novels were regularly labelled ‘unhealthy’ but was she, critics asked, a sensation novelist? How did her heady brand of romance, excess and sensuality square up alongside Mrs Wood’s gruesome murders and vulgarian moralizing? Ouida’s own tendency was to hold herself far above the fray and to present herself as superior, both in what she said and what she wrote, and therefore very different from the others. The capaciousness of the label can be also indicated by noting that in 1867 one aspect of sensation fiction is embodied in Rhoda Broughton’s Cometh up as a Flower, and another in Charles Felix’s The Notting Hill Mystery. While Broughton found her material in the ‘lover fever’ and ‘delirium of passion’ experienced by young middle-class women, Felix was finding, in the gentrified London suburb, a sinister vision of the city, relating a series of murders carried out by a serial killer who is also a mesmerist. The domestic romance of Broughton and the detective plot of Felix are contemporaneous and, as Victorian critics realized, an account of sensation fiction which accords one more significance than the other is misleading. Later, in 1870, Temple Bar differentiated between the ‘Fast School’, epitomized in the works of Annie Thomas and Ouida, and the ‘Sensation School’, represented by the work of Mary Braddon, and sometimes, it was hinted, George Eliot, at least in Felix Holt. By 1889, the Athenaeum, in an echo of Anthony Trollope’s famous assertion, had decided that: ‘Broadly speaking novels may be divided into two classes, in one of which interest is based on an exciting series of incidents and adventures – the sensation novel in short – while the other seeks to attract by an analysis and an illustration of certain mental and moral attributes’. Whatever one’s take on the genre, what is certainly true is that these different views of the novels and their writers set the terms for a critical
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debate which was still being played out in the 1880s and given the renewed interest in the genre, seems set to continue.

Like the novels reissued here, the articles serve as a reminder of the dimensions of Victorian popular fiction. This capaciousness is formulated in many ways. Inevitably, many of the extracts exemplify the tensions brought to the surface by the sensation novel, some of which have already been noted. Henry Mansel’s ‘Sensation Novels’, the Christian Remembrancer’s ‘Our Female Sensation Novelists’ and the London Quarterly Review’s ‘Thackeray and Modern Fiction’ all convey very clearly the extent to which a good deal of Victorian writing on the sensation fiction is characterized by squeamishness and an overwhelming sense of the genre’s offensiveness. Although it is easy to disparage men like Henry Mansel and later religiously-minded critics, whose readings of the sensation novelists were often based on what seems a narrow-minded, moralistic and excessively vicious analysis of the genre, such verdicts were extremely influential.

Other extracts included here indicate that interpretations of, and responses to, the sensation novel by Victorian critics resulted from a range of other nineteenth-century critical developments: the development of realism as a form of literary writing; an interest in some of the precedents for sensation fiction amongst earlier writers, and a growing awareness of its place within literary historiography. An interest in the cultural contexts of the genre and its relationships with a range of contemporary events formed the basis for articles in, for example, Blackwood’s Magazine, and the Medical Critic and Psychological Journal – the latter focusing on the physiological and psychological causes of sensation. Other articles included here reveal that the sensation novel prompted debates about what constituted acceptable subject matter for fiction, about literature as a commodity or art, about the moral responsibilities of novelists, about readers (particularly women readers), about ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture and about the genre’s wide appeal and prolonged success. In addition to discussions of sensation fiction’s boldness, there are articles analysing narrative style, characterization (including instances when this failed to satisfy) and ‘clever’ construction. These are discussions which did not necessarily lead to revolutionary re-theorizing but do highlight the extent to which mid-Victorian critics were interested in the dynamics and aesthetics of sensation fiction, an interest which is all too frequently shunted to one side. For other critics the genre’s literary status remained controversial and many found it impossible to be commendatory or accept it as a serious art form despite the valuable comparisons with Shakespeare and Scott made by G. A. Sala and others. The extracts also reveal some of the weapons used by the genre’s detractors, the tendency for example to describe sensation fiction as ‘house-maid literature’, manufactured, as the Saturday Review put it, as ‘toys for the class lowest in the social scale as well as in mental capacity’.12 Such claims were a response to fears about the vulgarization of literature and the genre’s
apparent utilization of mass (working-class) cultural forms, together with the suspicion that these were now creeping upwards from the gutter into the drawing room and that polite readers were now sharing the same kinds of pleasures as their indifferently educated servants. In another essay ‘Periodical Literature And Its Influences’, appearing in the forward-thinking women’s journal Rose Shamrock and Thistle (3 June 1863, p. 136), Herbert Graham asks: ‘Will the great and constantly increasing demand result in hasty and careless writing, having a baneful influence?’ This question in particular, and variations on it, preoccupied critics and writers of sensation fiction for the remainder of the century, though they did not easily reach an answer.

Note on selection and its arrangement

The anthology is comprised of extracts and full-length essays from a range of magazines and periodicals given in chronological order of publication. Representativeness and the contribution to the interpretation of the sensation novel and its authors were the key factors in selecting the essays and reviews, although it was felt very important to include texts from periodicals which may be difficult to locate outside research libraries. A few of the essays are analyses of individual authors rather than the sensation genre as a whole. In these cases the intention is suggest something of the centrality of these writers and the critical interest they provoked. For the most part the anthology is concerned with the sensation novel, though some extracts, for example, the Literary Times’s article ‘Sensation’ and the London Review’s report of “Lady Audley”. On The Stage, remind us that, while book reviewers were getting to grips with the popularity of sensation fiction, others were weighing up the merits of sensation drama and theatrical adaptations, and its place in the nation as a whole. One deliberate series of omission are the reviews appearing in overseas periodicals, in particular North American, Australian and European publications, which in terms of the critical response to the sensation debate can only expand our sense of its history and dimensions.

In terms of selection, I have attempted to include works by as many different critics as possible, although in some cases there are reviews by the same critic with the intention of giving some continuity to the anthology. Of these critics some are conservative in outlook, some are progressive. Some, who for want of a better term might be labelled ‘high-brow’, clearly see themselves as speaking to a well-educated (male) readership, parading their classical educations with a flourish. Others appear in ‘middle-brow’ magazines aimed at the family audience are often more chatty and less inclined to baffle their readers with obscure classical references and self-conscious displays of Latin. Many of the reviews were published anonymously, although works such as the Wellesley Index of Victorian Periodicals have now made it possible to identify some of the critics.
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The materials reprinted here follow the original texts in all important respects. The Victorian critic’s favourite device – long quotations from the novels under discussion – have been omitted in the majority of cases; however when such extracts form a key part of a critic’s argument they have been kept. Indications of the omitted quotations have been given so that reader may consult the original novels. Typographical errors in the original reviews have been silently corrected and factual errors made by critics have been corrected and/or commented on in endnotes or headnotes.

**Bibliography of Sensation Fiction 1855–1890**

The bibliography offers a new survey of the Victorian sensation novel from 1855 up to and including 1890. It lists novels in author order from the date of their initial appearance in volume form, beginning with *Current Repentance* by ‘A.B.C.S.’ (1885), and ending with *Lady Edith* by Anna Young (1869).

The aim of the bibliography is to provide an accessible list of identifiable sensation novels by British writers (male as well as female). Until now, the diversity of this work and its sheer volume has meant that readers have been discouraged from exploring the genre more widely beyond Collins and Braddon. Partly this is because there has been no recognizable source which researchers might consult as a starting point. Researchers need both access to and information about this hidden material, but it can be both time-consuming and difficult for them to discover it, or even realize that such material exists, let alone what individual texts are about. Thus, one of the aims of this bibliography is that it may help serve the wishes of students and readers whose interests are taking them beyond the familiar horizons of the Victorian literary scene, whilst at the same time providing some new perspectives on the genre of the sensation novel itself.

As has been indicated, the works of Collins, Braddon and to a lesser extent Wood have so monopolized discussion of the sensation novel that the co-existence of other writers and texts has tended to remain overlooked. What the sheer number of novels collected here suggest is that in no other period have so many novelists chosen to write so much about crime, madness and social rebellion. Indeed, in compiling the full list of entries of the bibliography – one considerably longer than the revised one offered here – it became evident that merely acknowledging the existence of these novels is a way of changing one’s sense of what the mid- and late-Victorian fiction scene actually looked like. Collected together these novels serve as a reminder of what John Sutherland terms Victorian fiction’s ‘lost continents’. From the point of view of the current project they also highlight the popularity and resilience of the sensation novel.

The bibliography lists a wide range of novels. It does not attempt to cover all the 60,000 works of fiction published in the Victorian period. As in any
project of this kind, limitations of space and time are factors. It is acknowledged that no time-frame can be distinct and there are clearly sensation novels which straddle both the 1850s and 1890s and the rather arbitrary boundaries indicate the need for further guides specifically covering the work of the years before and after these dates. The earlier date, 1855, has been chosen because it is an important year in the history of the sensation novel, the year in which Caroline Clive’s *Paul Feroll* was published. The year 1890 has been selected because this is the beginning of the decade which saw the final decline of the three-volume novel and the growing popularity of the short story in periodicals, both developments impacting on the serialization of full-length novels. Mary Braddon had started writing vampire stories by the 1890s and she may have realized that sensation stories were going out of vogue, or that a new kind of sensationalism was needed. This is not to say that there are not sensation novels which appear before 1855 – Wilkie Collins’s *Basil* in 1852 – or after 1890 – the multi-authored *The Fate of Fenella* (1891–2). In a work of this kind it is necessary to be selective and there is always a feeling of incompleteness.

The bibliography has not attempted to achieve a complete comprehensiveness in terms of the works and authors it lists (if indeed this were possible). Readers might also note that not all novels by particularly well-known authors are included. This is partly a matter of space. It also has to do with the fact that other bibliographies do exist, notably those for Mary Braddon (constructed by Jennifer Carnell in *The Literary Lives of Mary Braddon* (2000)), Ellen Wood (on the website established by Michael Flowers (http://www.mrs henrywood.co.uk)) and Wilkie Collins (on the website maintained by Paul Lewis (http://www.deadline.demon.co.uk/wilkie/wilkie.htm), and in the series of bibliographies of Victorian Fiction published under the auspices of the Victorian Fiction Research Unit, Department of English, University of Queensland. The reader is directed to these for more detailed information on the full works of these particular authors.

One fact which does emerge from the bibliography is that the history of sensation fiction does not fit neatly into the ten-year span 1860–70 and that this part of the history of the genre needs re-writing. For the next thirty years we find a large number of novels bearing such evocative titles as *The Surgeon’s Secret* (1872), *Crying for Vengeance* (1877), *Are You My Wife?* (1878), *The Mysteries of Heron Dyke. A Novel of Incident* (1880), *Guy Darrel’s Wives* (1884), *Mrs Keith’s Crime. A Record* (1885), *The Coastguard’s Secret* (1886), *Keep My Secret* (1886), *Sudden Death; or, My Lady the Wolf* (1886), *Whose Wife?* (1888). The last named, written by Mrs J. Harcourt Roe, is a tale of bigamy and marital abuse. Such novels comprised a considerable number, so much so that in 1885 the *Athenaeum* noted how ‘[t]he tales of mystery and murder which went out of fashion as soon as art came in are beginning to captivate once more, and the novel of furniture is giving way to the raw
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tones of the romance of crime’. As the same magazine later noted ‘Most readers like strong emotions and plenty of incident. Those therefore who write as much for money as for fame are bound to be sensational.’ Such comments suggest that, whilst crude imitation and duplication were clearly present in some of these later works, there is also a basis here for a study of the revisionism inherent in them. This would be to say something about the development of the sensation novel from the 1850s to the 1890s, including a consideration of its influence on the development of other literary trends.

Method and sources for the bibliography

One starting point for this bibliography has been the reading of a range of three-decker novels held in the British Library. The other has been a study of the review columns of five nineteenth-century periodicals. These are: the Athenaeum, the Spectator, the Saturday Review, the London Review and the Reader. All were influential in their own day. Of these, the Athenaeum carried the most reviews (sometimes as many as six a week in its ‘New Novels’ column) and in the ten years 1860–70, the magazine reviewed 1,600 titles. In the same period, the Spectator carried 908; the Saturday, 521 and the London Review, 810. The Reader, edited by David Masson, tended towards longer articles but still managed 441 by the time it ceased publication in 1866. What makes these sources important is the scope they give for tracking down novels by forgotten writers, whose works are no longer read, studied or in print, and who rarely warrant any mention in conventional histories of the novel. They also indicate the rising popularity of certain novelists and paint a picture of the ‘scene of fiction’ at a particular historical moment.

Taking these sources as starting points has meant that some novels have been overlooked. It is likely that a further search of other periodical sources, for example, the Examiner (to 1881) or the Academy (which began to review fiction from the mid-1870s) will result in more entries. The bibliography, as it appears here, is incomplete, as indeed it will always be. Nonetheless, the listings offer details of a large body of fiction, hardly any of which has been studied or considered since it was first published.

Giving particular novels the label ‘sensational’ can of course be problematic. As indicated earlier, there was never a single, all-encompassing definition of the sensation novel. Many borderline cases could be disputed endlessly, and the Victorian reviewers’ own guidelines for labelling are by no means consistent. There has necessarily been some personal selection and weighting in the preparation of these entries. The bibliography includes novelists who have been readily labelled as producing this type of fiction, as well as those who have tended to be identified with other kinds of writing. The list includes novels by male authors and also novels by Irish writers.
Details of books have been checked with the Nineteenth Century Short Title Catalogue (I and II) and the British Library Catalogue. In a bibliography of this size it has not been possible to inspect all books. Books which could not be located but which appear in review columns have been included. Excluded are individual short stories, unless anthologized or collected.

Arrangement of the Bibliography

It is to be expected that readers will approach a bibliography with certain ideas about what they want to find. When was X published? Who was the author of Y? Every attempt has been made to ensure that they do not close its pages feeling thwarted. Nonetheless the bibliography is not an encyclopaedia along the lines of John Sutherland’s Companion to Victorian Fiction. Like that immensely valuable reference work which covers an enormous canvas, there are omissions and certain bits of information have, to date, proved impossible to trace.

After experimenting with a number of choices, it has been decided to organize the bibliography along dictionary lines i.e. the entries appear alphabetically under the name of the author. An alternative would have been to present the novels chronologically, which would have given a sense of ongoing production and fashions. However this would have made searching more difficult for the user, unless s/he knew what to look for.

Author

Each author is entered under his or her own name or the name which s/he chose and used. An attempt has been made to supply the first name since this may help readers track down these authors in library catalogues. The identity behind a pseudonym is then given (if this is known). Double-barrelled names are listed according to the last name. For example Mrs Mackenzie Daniel is listed under ‘D’ rather than ‘M’. Prefixes such as ‘de’ and ‘du’ have been listed as part of the author’s surname. In the case of works attributed to more than one author, for example, those novels in which Edmund Yates is reputed to have worked in partnership with Frances Cashel Hoey, the title appears alongside the name under which it was first published i.e. Yates. In the list of authors, their dates (birth and death) have been given where possible, including circa dates.

Although the list has deliberately omitted qualifications such as ‘MA’, it has retained honorifics, in the interests of providing as much information as possible about the author. Thus, for women, married names are given e.g. Mrs Henry Wood. So, too, are titles, if these were chosen or used by the author e.g. Lady Mary Hardy.

Anonymous texts have been listed under ‘Anon.’; pseudonymous texts are listed under the pseudonym adopted by the author, in alphabetical order.
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Texts which were published anonymously but which I have attributed to a named author are listed under the author’s surname, though the unsigned status is recorded in the description. In some cases, authors remain unidentified.

The likely identities of authors, together with their dates (where known) is based on evidence from various sources: the Nineteenth Century Short Title Catalogue, the Dictionary of National Biography, John Sutherland’s Companion to Victorian Fiction. I have also consulted Sarah Keith’s two-volume bibliography Mudie’s Library Ltd. Principal Works of Fiction in Circulation 1848, 1858, 1869 and Mudie’s Library Ltd, 1876, 1884 and Barbara McNeill’s Author Biographies Master Index. The more prolific and (one assumes) more successful anonymous or pseudonymous novelists are easier to identify because they leave more traces of themselves. Other have proved much harder to track down. So, whilst Eliza Rhyl Davies, author of The Mystery of Ashleigh Manor (1874), was quickly revealed to be William Clark Russell (1844–1911), there are few clues as to the identity of the author of Life’s Masquerade, an unsigned story of murder and theft published by the minor London firm of Wood in 1867.

In some cases identifying authors has proved difficult due to the fact that large numbers of novels were published using the ‘By the Author of …’ signature. An attempt has been made to identify as many of these authors as possible and, where identification has been made, the author is listed by surname. For authors who were public favourites the task can be fairly straightforward. For example, Tinsley’s Gone Like a Shadow (1871) is described as being ‘By the author of Recommended to Mercy’; this is the disguise adopted by Mathilda Charlotte Houston. With the identification of some of the authors behind the less well-known novels and labels, it is hoped that some light has been shed on the scene of fiction. In the cases of some other titles, attribution has proved more difficult, particularly if the novel is the work of a writer who produced only one or two anonymous works with a publishing house whose records have been destroyed. Newby’s What Money Can’t Do (1866), ‘By the author of “Altogether Wrong” &c’, remains unattributed, as does the author of Sampson Low’s John Haile: a Story of a Successful Failure (1885), given simply as ‘By the author of ‘Sleepy Sketches’.

Title

The bibliography lists the full titles of works of fiction from a thirty-five year period. The inclusion or exclusion of a particular title is partly the result of judgments of how a particular novel fits the criteria. A work is included if a contemporary reviewer gave it the label ‘sensational’, or at least treated it as such, or if its known subject matter and themes fit the broad category of what recent critics have generally understood by the term. Hardly any of the novels use the term ‘sensational’ in their titles. Sometimes discrepancies do