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Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald

INTRODUCTION

Miss Braddon is the leader of her school, and to her the first honours ought naturally to be given, but her disciples are many.¹

As Tamara S. Wagner notes in the fourth essay of the present special issue: “It has become a literary truism that the mid Victorian sensation craze extended well beyond ‘the sensational sixties’ and comprised a surprisingly varied set of authors, books and even moral or ideological agendas”. Indeed, significant scholarly work has been undertaken over the last few decades which has recovered a number of hitherto neglected authors of the mid and late nineteenth century. Andrew Maunder’s 2004 *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction, 1855–1890*, for instance, was an important contribution to the project of extending our current knowledge of writers associated with the sensation phenomenon, and Pamela K. Gilbert’s *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (2011) continued this work by including chapters on a number of neglected female novelists such as Charlotte M. Brame, Rhoda Broughton, Amelia B. Edwards, Mary Cecil Hay, Florence Marryat, Ouida and Dora Russell.² Nonetheless, the extent of the diversity of sensation fiction and the numerous women associated with it have yet to be fully explored.

Recoveries of forgotten, neglected or marginalized women writers have begun to transform the field and redraw the map of nineteenth-century literary studies. However, in certain fundamental ways, such recoveries have only served to demonstrate the canon’s extraordinary resilience, particularly in terms of university curricula. If, as Roland Barthes suggested, the canon is essentially “what is taught”, then, despite the recovery work carried out since the 1970s, if we consider the Victorian female novelists whose place in the canon today might be deemed unassailable and who regularly appear on university syllabuses, the picture is not so very different from the “Great Tradition” proposed by F.R. Leavis.³ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have posed the question: “Are we simply constructing new, exclusive canons when we discover ‘neglected’ writers, or are we re-thinking the whole idea of ‘the canon’ and canonisation?”⁴ The answer, by and large, would have to be the former, since, in many ways, moves to expand the canon or construct alternative canons have tended to follow the same hierarchical principles, as well as replicate notions of aesthetic value based upon predominantly male-authored realist and modernist texts.⁵ Without depreciating the importance of

Elaine Showalter's recovery of neglected women writers, it might be argued that her "gynocriticism" results in a female canon which maintains the standards, practices and assumptions of the "patriarchal canon" with which she takes issue. Moreover, the suggestions of separatism, implied even in her title *A Literature of Their Own*, evade the necessity of reintegrating women's writing meaningfully into the existing canon, so that, although it is ostensibly separate and equal, it arguably remains supplementary and "other".⁶ Thus, despite the rediscovery of many popular nineteenth-century women writers, the vast majority of them currently remain resolutely non-canonical.

This is not to say that recovery is a futile task. Critical work on conventionally devalued literary forms frequently associated with women's writing, such as Gothic, melodrama and sentiment, has challenged traditional ideas about aesthetic value and literary worth. Arguably, the opposition between "serious" and "popular" is hardly as clear-cut and well defined as is often implied, and the boundaries are continually being transgressed. As Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn have observed: "there are no transcendent or absolute rules about what belongs in the zone of the literary and in the zone of the non-literary [. . . T]he lines can be drastically redrawn".⁷ An example of this is the way in which recent scholarship has demonstrated that female sensationalists such as Broughton and Braddon are more sophisticated in their textual strategies than previously credited, thereby justifying literary-critical attention to the aesthetic and formal aspects of their fiction, rather than earlier studies which tended to examine sensation novels largely for their sociological interest. The essays collected here are a part of this impulse, showing how female sensationalists often employ self-reflexivity, metafictional techniques and narrative innovations. This special issue works on the assumption that it is possible to retain a healthy suspicion regarding the hierarchical and gendered processes of canon formation, while also analysing women's popular writing from a text-based approach that recognizes its aesthetic qualities.

Until relatively recently, the recovery of forgotten nineteenth-century novels and authors was hampered through limited access to Victorian editions of texts long out of print, as well as manuscripts and other archival material, which would enable us to challenge the prevailing critical paradigm. And these accessibility factors had implications for the continued marginalization of popular female writers, who were (and remain) largely unavailable in modern critical editions. As Carol Poster observed:

When researching the sensation novel, a scholar is more likely to draw on the readily available volumes by Dickens or Collins for examples and evidence than to focus on works by women accessible only through interlibrary loan or travel to specialized libraries.⁸

Poster's 1996 article drew attention to the problems of oxidization and the potential permanent loss of the substantial body of forgotten and neglected works by Victorian women writers. However, the recent large-scale digitalization of nineteenth-century literature has gone some way to circumventing this threat, and the projects of Google, Internet Archive and others have, to a great extent, democratized the field and opened up new opportunities for reassessing the field of popular fiction.

We would suggest that such critical scrutiny of the wider field is crucial if we are to move beyond an understanding of sensation fiction based on a relatively narrow range of authors and works, and, although this situation is beginning to change, as indicated above, there remains a tendency for Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and (to a lesser extent) Ellen Wood to retain the preponderance of critical attention. In terms of the woman's sensation novel, Braddon has come to epitomize the field, and she arguably constitutes one of the most successfully recovered authors of modern times. Perhaps this is hardly surprising given that she was similarly situated by the Victorians themselves. Indeed, it cannot be overstated how far Braddon became a byword for sensation and for the popular female author in the second half of the nineteenth century. She was, from the beginning, a key target of the critical backlash against sensation, and periodical essays and reviews of the period are filled with references to the "Miss Braddon school", although few ever clarify which writers they perceive to be implicated in this group. For this reason, our title, *Beyond Braddon*, signals a desire to look beyond the pre-eminence of the "queen of sensation" in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of female sensation writing and its many variants within middlebrow popular fiction of the period. Which authors did Victorian readers perceive to be of "the school of Miss Braddon"? Who were the many "disciples" to whom Margaret Oliphant alludes in the quotation heading this introduction? And how did their fiction correspond to and diverge from the sensational mode that became synonymous with Braddon's name?

These questions, among others, provided the initial impetus for this special issue on the female sensationalists often overshadowed by the dominant focus on Braddon. The immediate origins of the project grew out of the current editors' shared interest in both Braddon and Amelia Edwards, which led to our jointly presenting papers at a Braddon-Edwards-themed study day organized by the Victorian Popular Fiction Association in March 2011. A series of conversations ensued, in which we became increasingly keen to discover what current work, if any, was being carried out on the many forgotten popular female writers associated with sensation fiction. We were particularly interested in reassessing the contribution of women such as Mrs Mackenzie Daniels, Annie Edwardes, Annie French (Mrs Annie Hector Alexander), Mrs C.J. Newby (Emma Warburton), Charlotte Riddell, Mrs Gordon

Smythies and Annie Thomas, who were all popular and successful in their own time but essentially invisible in modern literary-historiographical accounts of the period. However, we were also concerned to reassess the relationship to the sensation genre of authors currently attracting increasing critical notice, most notably Rhoda Broughton, Amelia Edwards, Florence Marryat and Ouida. This collection of essays includes fresh perspectives on these marginally more familiar writers, while also offering new critical approaches to an author such as Matilda Houston, who has been completely overlooked by modern criticism.

Work thus remains to be done on the numerous female authors who helped to shape the critical and public consciousness of sensation fiction during the 1860s and beyond; the genre was, after all, largely perceived to be dominated by both women writers and readers. Key to the public perception of sensation fiction during the 1860s was a trio of writers who shared the first name Annie. With over 100 novels to her name, Annie Thomas (Annie Hall Cudlip) was more prolific than her better-remembered rival Braddon, and the two writers were frequently compared. Margaret Oliphant, in her oft-cited 1867 *Blackwood's* article "Novels", linked Thomas and Braddon, tracing the former's perceived transgressions against moral decency directly to Braddon's influence.⁹ Thomas, like Rhoda Broughton and Florence Marryat (the latter a close friend), was consistently taken to task for immorality by conservative critics, who objected to her representations of female sexuality and transgression of sexual codes. Her 1865 novel *False Colours*, for example, offers a sustained and sympathetic treatment of an unmarried mother, and her novels generally are concerned with critiquing contemporary marriage and its inequities. In a similar manner to Braddon, Thomas is often critical of Victorian social conventions, particularly those that encouraged female dependency.

Annie French (Mrs Annie Hector Alexander) was another writer who came to prominence in the 1860s, with novels closely adhering to the key tropes and conventions of sensation fiction.¹⁰ Her immensely popular *Look Before You Leap* (1865) centred on a misconceived elopement between a supposed heiress and a soldier, while her novel for the following year, *Which Shall It Be?*, featured a Frenchman's abduction of a young governess on a train. Even more shocking to some Victorian sensibilities were the racy novels of Annie Edwards. Her popular *Miss Forrester* (1865) featured another fair schemer in the Lady Audley mould, and her works generally explore the double standards entrenched within the Victorian sexual code, often focusing, as in *The Ordeal of Wives* (1864), on an unscrupulous woman's intrigues in high society. Even before sensation fiction had become the focus of critical attack, Edwards' 1858 novel *The Morals of Mayfair* had been declined by Mudie, who refused to stock it in his

circulating library.¹¹ A reviewer for the *Morning Post* summed up the representative judgement of conservative critics on Edwardes:

The tendency of every novel written by this lady has been objectionable, and their style has been invariably coarse, so that the public for a considerable time paid her sex the compliment of refusing to believe that “The Morals of Mayfair” and “Creeds” were productions of a woman’s pen.¹²

Thomas, French and Edwardes, along with numerous other women writers who have similarly fallen into thorough obscurity, present us with a fuller picture of Victorian sensationalism, in all its many forms. Although this special issue does not feature essays on these forgotten authors, our hope is that its aims and concerns may direct future critical attention towards their work.

The seven essays here offer new perspectives on sensation fiction and women’s placement within it, as reviewers, writers, readers and fictional characters. They examine fiction by Rhoda Broughton, Amelia Edwards, George Eliot, Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, Florence Marryat, Ouida and Ellen Wood. Nearly all of our contributors accept the notion that the sensation genre is difficult to define and fix, and that it cannot be entirely separated from other genres and modes of expression, including the realist novel, the ghost story, melodrama, burlesque and even scientific and medical discourses. For instance, sensation is often defined against realist or domestic fiction, despite the overlaps between these narrative forms. Attempting to understand the relationship between sensation and realism has caused critics to adopt terms such as “domestic sensationalism”, “conservative sensationalism” or “quasi-sensation novels”, labels that are often used to describe works by women writers in particular.¹³ Yet such terms only seem to highlight the ways in which sensation is a polymorphous, even perverse, form; in fact, there might be no example of “pure” sensation which is not in some way influenced by, or influences, other genres and discourses, as our contributors demonstrate.

Tabitha Sparks’ essay rejects the attempts of critics to identify hybrid sensation genres; instead, she proposes a new category with which to understand novels written between 1860 and 1890 that employ the subject matter of sensation fiction while also incorporating emotional introspection and realist techniques: the “novel of experience”. These novels feature mature heroines who are somehow fallen, but are reintegrated back into society in ways that offer challenges to acceptable female behaviour. Sparks examines one such novel, Matilda Charlotte Houstoun’s *Recommended to Mercy* (1862), whose heroine is an unapologetic mistress. She argues that the narrator pleads for her heroine’s forgiveness and, in so doing, challenges the assumed judgments of her readers and offers them a model of a “new social tolerance”. In situating the novel’s audience, Sparks invokes George Eliot’s Mrs Farthingale, the lady

reader who complains that Amos Barton is “[a]n utterly uninteresting character” in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). She suggests that Houstoun, unlike Eliot, takes such a middlebrow reader for granted and attempts to reorient or instruct her.

Mary Beth Tegan cites the same passage from *Scenes of Clerical Life* that features Eliot’s scapegoated lady reader. Tegan suggests that while Eliot attempts to distance her works from those featuring mystery, murder and adultery, or what would ostensibly become known as sensation fiction, in her historical romance *Romola* (1862–63), she, in fact, engages with sensational themes and generic conventions. Tegan shows how Eliot’s ambivalence about sensational reading and writing is depicted in the novel, specifically via *Romola*’s sympathetic nature, which makes her too sensitive to the feelings and wants of others. Like a female reader, *Romola*, Tegan argues, must be reconditioned so as to avoid falling into a submissive state. Tegan’s essay makes links between literary, physiological and psychological discourses of sensation, and reveals that even quintessential realists like Eliot engaged with sensationalism, although with degrees of ambivalence.

Further troubling notions of genre, Nick Freeman’s essay examines the intersections between sensation fiction and the ghost story, both of which, in Victorian England, might be understood as female genres. He finds connections in their similar focus on mystery and withheld detail, on dualities between appearance and reputation, and the production of affect. By examining ghost stories written by three important sensation writers—Rhoda Broughton, Amelia Edwards and Ellen Wood—Freeman compares the stories’ “ghostly intrusions” to the “domestic disruptions of sensation fiction”; in various ways, both forms dramatize the precariousness of female existence, whether earthly or metaphysical.

Tamara S. Wagner also examines the fiction of Rhoda Broughton, in particular her 1873 novel *Nancy*. In this novel, Broughton sets up expectations for an adultery plot, only to defeat those readerly expectations; Wagner proposes that she thus manipulates sensational paradigms, recognizable to Victorian audiences by the 1870s, and forces her readers to confront their own reliance on clichés and familiar formulas. Broughton scholarship has been dominated by her first two novels—*Not Wisely, but Too Well* (1867) and *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867)—which are more easily marked as sensational; this has meant that those novels which are more challenging to categorize, such as *Nancy*, have been largely ignored. As Wagner notes: “Not all of Broughton’s novels do what critics want them to do, and hence her deliberate toying with narrative conventions still makes her reassessment problematic or, at best, piecemeal”. Wagner’s essay, which reads *Nancy* as a critique of sensationalism and its intended readership, is thus an important intervention into Broughton scholarship, as well as another reminder of the ways in which popular women

writers challenged their readers. As Sparks notes in her essay, reading these understudied novels—now widely available on the Internet—allows us to designate new genres, as well as to gain a better comprehension of those genres already identified. The essays by Sparks, Tegan, Freeman and Wagner thus draw a picture of popular Victorian women writers—and one typically not understood as a so-called popular writer in George Eliot—toying with narrative and generic conventions in innovative, and often surprising, ways.

Broughton is one of many female authors who continued writing into the late nineteenth century. The fact that four of the seven essays in this collection discuss sensationalism beyond the 1860s shows the manner in which sensational discourses extended beyond the initial craze. Yet how to understand and classify *fin-de-siècle* fiction by writers previously associated with the sensation genre nonetheless poses challenges for critics. For instance, is it productive to identify sensational modes or discourses, rather than simply understanding sensation as a fixed genre? Is the New Woman an extension of the sensational heroine and, if so, how? The remaining essays in the collection attempt to answer these questions, amongst others.

In her essay, Greta Depledge examines the clash of medical and marital plot lines in Florence Marryat's *An Angel of Pity* (1898). Marryat, who is typically classified as a sensation writer, wrote over 70 novels in her 30-year career. Depledge situates *An Angel of Pity* as a sensational exploration into the late nineteenth-century vivisection debate; in so doing, she gestures to the convention of referencing scientific and medical debates as a narrative device in Victorian popular fiction, specifically in sensation novels such as Wilkie Collins' *Heart and Science* (1883). She maps the ways in which Marryat borrowed from medical texts and pamphlets, and included graphic, often shocking, details of vivisection in her novel. Depledge's essay emphasizes the feminist impulses that drive Marryat's text, specifically the desire for equality in marriage which was such a keynote in New Woman writing. Such themes can be read as extensions of those present in sensation fiction, which dramatized women's restricted position in marriage and the regulation of female sexuality.

Further exploring these issues, Lisa Hager's essay connects Ouida's 1884 novel *Princess Napraxine* and her infamous 1894 essay "The New Woman", finding within them similar concerns with female agency and the dangers of desire. Hager identifies a "continued mobilization of sensational vocabularies of representation" in Ouida's fictional and non-fictional writing—that is, she argues that the sensational language used to communicate the New Woman's struggles with overwhelming outside forces is indebted to sensation fiction of the 1860s and 1870s, which depicts "desire as a force that imperils the coherence of the individual". She thus builds upon the work of previous critics, such as Lyn Pykett, in showing how New Woman fiction advances the

language and ideological impulses of sensation. In addition to offering new ways of linking the New Woman and the sensation heroine, Hager's understanding of sensation as a vocabulary of representation is a useful way in which to chart the legacy of sensationalism in late Victorian fiction.

Finally, Jane Jordan places Ouida's work within the context of late nineteenth-century debates over literary censorship. Jordan details the way in which Ouida's fiction became a touchstone for questions over what was acceptable subject matter in fiction. By examining reviews of Ouida's work, her correspondence with publishers, her periodical writings, parodies of her work, stage adaptations and burlesques, Jordan documents Ouida's challenge to the literary establishment. Ouida's fiction, although criticized for its explicit sensuality, was still stocked by the principal circulating libraries; Jordan suggests that one reason for this was the generic categorization of her work as sensational romances that presented fantastical situations in foreign settings, rather than conventional sensation novels set in England. Ouida's own foreignness was important in her criticisms of English literary culture and her authorial positioning, too; Jordan suggests that she cultivated a French identity, a sign of her rejection of English moral restrictions. In fact, Ouida complained that the realist English novel was "spineless", while realist French novels were "not afraid to grapple with vice and depravity in its worst form". Ouida, then, labelled her own work not as sensationalist, but as a form of French-influenced realism. Her attempts at generic classification and her own position within the literary canon can further our understanding of female sensationalism and the stakes inherent in claiming an affiliation to the sensation school.

Taken together, these essays draw a picture of female sensation writers that is varied and complex. They emphasize the ways in which these writers were adept at working within various genres and responding to—and even moulding—the literary establishment, as in Ouida's responses to censorship or Wood's, Broughton's and Edwards' forays into the short story. They also show the ways in which popular women writers developed complex relationships with their readers, encouraging them to be self-reflexive about sensationalism and its pitfalls, as in Houstoun's narratorial interventions, Eliot's ambivalent responses to sensation and sympathy and Broughton's self-conscious rewriting of sensation plot lines. Finally, they demonstrate the manner in which these authors prefigured New Woman writers, with their emphasis on the importance of female self-knowledge, rationality and the dangers of desire, as in Marryat's depiction of her medical-savvy heroine Rose Gordon and Ouida's wilful Princess Napraxine. Given the richness of such texts and such scholarship, we hope that this special issue encourages further work on these authors, as well as those female sensation writers whose work has not yet been reassessed, but whose recovery will no doubt offer a fuller picture of women's writing, reading and placement within Victorian literary history.

Notes

- 1 Margaret Oliphant, "Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 102 (Sept. 1867) 257–80 (260).
- 2 Andrew Maunder, ed., *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction, 1855–1890* (London: Pickering, 2004); Pamela K. Gilbert, ed., *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
- 3 George Eliot and one or more of the Brontës continue to be the most commonly featured female novelists, with, more recently, Elizabeth Gaskell being added to their ranks. Braddon is increasingly taught on undergraduate programmes, but it is questionable whether this makes her canonical, since she usually features as a representative of popular sensation fiction and, by implication, a contrast to "serious" novelists.
- 4 Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, 3rd ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2004) 48.
- 5 Jan Gorak has noted that a key value in the critical recognition of serious literature has been a certain form of textual difficulty. He traces this value back to T.S. Eliot and the Leavisite and New Critic agendas more generally, suggesting that difficult works become "a kind of badge for an educated elite whose apparent disagreements on points of interpretation conceal a deeper consensus and an undemocratic commitment to the virtues of the hermetic". This valorization of "difficulty" is a crucial factor in the dismissal of a popular genre such as sensation fiction, which is generally, and often unfairly, perceived to be plot-driven, univocal and unambiguous. Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (London: Athlone, 1991) 246.
- 6 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1977; London: Virago, 1999).
- 7 Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, introduction, *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: MLA, 1992) 1–11 (5).
- 8 Carol Poster, "Oxidization Is a Feminist Issue: Acidity, Canonicity, and Popular Victorian Female Authors," *College English* 58.3 (1996): 287–306 (295).
- 9 Oliphant 258–60. As Solveig Robinson points out, Oliphant mistakenly attributes Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* to Thomas. See Solveig Robinson, ed., *A Serious Occupation: Literary Criticism by Victorian Women Writers* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003) 145.
- 10 Annie French published under the name "A.F. Hector", although some later editions of her novels carry her married name "Mrs Alexander".
- 11 Guinevere Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1970) 146; Jennifer Carnell, *The Literary Lives of M.E. Braddon* (Hastings: Sensation, 2000) 169.
- 12 "Literature: Miss Forrester," *Morning Post* 16 Oct. 1865: 2.

- 13 For examples, see Poster 294; Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991) 1; June Sturrock, "Murder, Gender, and Popular Fiction by Women in the 1860s: Braddon, Oliphant, Yonge," *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, ed. Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 73–88 (74).

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