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Rudolph Glitz

Down from the Attic:

The Violent Madwoman in Victorian Sensation Fiction

- Andrew Mangham: *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction. Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2007. 247 S. Hardcover. EUR (D) 51,99. ISBN: 978-0-230-54521-2.

- [1] Today's student of Victorian culture hardly needs to be reminded that Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Rochester is only one of many 19th-century depictions of violent madwomen. In addition to Gilbert and Gubar's classic account of such depictions in the works of canonical female novelists (1979), there is Elaine Showalter's barely less seminal *The Female Malady* (1985), which traces the »rise of the Victorian madwoman« (p. 51) and her oppressive »management« (p. 31) by men through a broad variety of cultural objects, including, among others, psychological writings such as asylum records, novels, paintings, and public policies. These pioneering analyses were, in turn, followed by slightly differently oriented but similarly wide-ranging studies such as Janet Oppenheim's *Shattered Nerves* (1991) and Helen Small's *Love's Madness* (1996) as well as, yet more recently, an increasing number of article publications in the field of cultural studies. This ongoing academic fascination with the violent madwoman seems to draw much of its force from the political concerns of feminism and Foucault's groundbreaking work on insanity. Yet the fact that it continues unabated until today may also be due to our ever-growing access to, and interest in, the popular literary sources in which she makes an appearance. This, at least, is suggested by Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore's programmatically canon-expanding essay collection *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation* (2004) as well as, and needless to say perhaps, the monograph under review here. **1**

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- ▷ Kriminalität und Medien
- ▷ Literatur 1830-1880

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- ▷ Viktorianische Literatur
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- ▷ Frauenbild
- ▷ Wahnsinn
- ▷ Verbrechen
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- ▷ Diskussionsforen
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[2] As suggested by its title and according to the author himself, Andrew Mangham's new study adds to the interdisciplinary scholarship on female violence and insanity by combining three prominent »nineteenth-century discourses« – namely those of popular literature, science, and jurisprudence. More specifically, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine, and Victorian Popular Culture* aims a) »to uncover previously unnoticed connections« between the three discourses in question and b) to show that by exploring said connections »one learns a great deal about each one of these fields and the larger culture into which it was embedded« (pp. 2–3). While roughly indicative of the book's thematic orientation, of course, these overarching objectives are still relatively vague and hence barely surprising in their academic context. Together with the absence of any explicitly formulated theoretical framework – beyond very brief claims to an »interdisciplinary methodology«, that is (p. 6) – they suggest from the outset an emphasis on detailed observation rather than interpretive synthesis.

[3]

The Myth of the Violent Madwoman

[4] This impression is confirmed by the first chapter, where Mangham adduces various contemporary descriptions of insane female violence in order to extract from them a stereotypical profile or »myth« across discourses (p. 48). In doing so, he usefully distinguishes between adolescent, maternal, and post-menopausal women, and reveals for each group a somewhat differently inflected link between the potential for violence and female biology. Again, the most general statements Mangham makes about his findings are neither very precise nor novel within the scholarly context in which he writes. When he claims that women of all ages were, because of their sex, widely perceived as »frequently on the brink of violent insanity« and that this in some ways »facilitated a more robust control over the female population« (p. 48), one is immediately reminded of Showalter's more forceful as well as nuanced claims along similar lines (see esp. pp. 55 and 73 of *The Female Malady*). How frequently women were seen like that and how far removed »the brink of insanity« actually was from perceived normality, both female and male, would have been more interesting questions for Mangham to address.

[5] Having said that, the Showalterian generalisations Mangham does make can certainly benefit from further textual support. It is clearly in this area, and especially in the fascinating primary material Mangham discusses, that his study shows its strength. There is, for example, the little-known short story *The White Maniac: A Doctor's Tale* (written in 1863), in which the maddening and sexually suggestive colour red throws a pubescent girl into fits of cannibalism (pp. 9–12); the (pseudo-)medical debate over wet-nursing as a way of passing on insanity (pp. 29–32); and the much publicised real-life case of the so-called »Road Child Murder«, whose challenge to the Victorian ideal of female domesticity and consequent repercussions in some contemporary sensation novels form the subject of Mangham's entire second chapter. His readings, in this connection, of Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Mrs Henry Wood's *St Martin's Eve* (1866), and Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) all argue that, while reproducing the Victorian myth of the violent madwoman, these bestselling novels also subverted it by subtly alerting their readers to its constructedness and ideological fabrication by men who are themselves psychologically flawed (see esp. pp. 69, 77, and 86).

[6] Extensions of the Argument

[7] Mangham's following, largely author-based chapters are not summarised anywhere in his study, which is again indicative of his focus on detailed observation. At the risk of oversimplification, one could perhaps best describe them as an extension of his argument in chapter two – though sometimes in more tentative form – to various other and in many cases lesser-known works by the same three novelists. Thus, in chapter three, he laudably discusses not only Mary Braddon's relatively familiar *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), but also her poem *Under the Sycamores* (1861), *The Trial of the Serpent* (1861), *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), and similarly under-researched texts. His main and as such persuasively illustrated point in this chapter seems to be that Braddon's violent madwomen do, on the one hand, conform to the man-made stereotype he outlined earlier, but, on the other, are also presented as exploited by, and sometimes hindering, the socially ambitious schemes of her male villains (see pp. 90, 92, 100 f., 119). Why Mangham diametrically opposes these two roles of the women in question, however, and regards the second as making Braddon less of a misogynist (cf. p. 125) is not explained in the chapter – an omission that forms part of a larger problem to be addressed later in this review.

- [8] In chapter four, Mangham turns to, among others, *East Lynne* (1862), *Danesbury House* (1860), *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1864), and *Verner's Pride* (1863) – all by the bestselling sensation writer Mrs Henry Wood. Wood, too, is described as perpetuating the established myth of the violent madwoman while simultaneously – and somewhat obscurely linked to this first aspect – challenging Victorian orthodoxies. Although this time more narrowly specified than in the last chapter, the orthodoxies in question are once again those of social self-advancement. Taking issue with Deborah Wynne's view of Mrs Wood as »championing the middle classes«, Mangham diagnoses »a more ambivalent and uneasy attitude towards professional development within [her] texts« (p. 129). ² In his eyes, her texts are, if perhaps not quite subversive, then at least immune against charges of unquestioning conformism because the various dramatic disasters they depict are brought about not only by the violent madwomen that populate them, but also by men and their conventionally masculine endeavours.
- [9] Mangham's fifth and last chapter offers yet more modified versions of his central argument – this time with regard to several of Wilkie Collins's novels. Mainly on the basis of Walter Hartwright's excitement and vaguely suggested sexual fantasies at the sight of Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, *The Woman in White* (1860) is seen as illustrating that »female dangers are the fabrication of unbalanced, masculine fixations« (p. 196). In *No Name* (1862), the close associations with natural science of the »deceptive« Magdalen and the »inglorious« Mrs Lecount are regarded as highlighting the »faults and problems of the male observer« (ibid.). *Armada* (1866), finally, is read as confirming the myth of the violent madwoman as well as exposing »the most unsettling elements of *masculine* culture« by presenting Lydia Gwilt as Ozia Midwinter's evil *doppelgänger* (p. 202) – a Mrs Hyde to his Mr Jekyll, so to speak. This chapter is followed by a very brief conclusion to the book, in which Mangham describes the violent madwomen in 1860s sensation fiction as prefiguring the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* in such works as Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894).

[10]

From Well-Observed Detail to the Problem of Representativeness

- [11] Skeletal summaries such as the above can perhaps never do full justice to a book whose emphasis is evidently – and, in principle, quite legitimately of course – on detailed observation and analysis. After all, not every kind of insight lends itself to generalisation. Mangham’s highlighting of, say, the medico-sexual connotations of the shivering quicksand in *The Moonstone* certainly enriches our reading of that particular text (p. 83). And so, to give another example, does his brief but persuasive linking of the character descriptions in *No Name* with Lavaterian theories of physiognomy that were becoming popular again after the advent of photography (p. 185). Mangham’s micro-analyses here may yield no more exciting general statements than that there are such connotations and cross-discursive influences, and that they form a complex web of inter-relations. Yet this hardly detracts from the status of his findings as valuable contributions to scholarship. Of course, Mangham still requires the broader arguments outlined above in order to link together his analytical observations. Yet as long as these arguments are based on widely shared assumptions of his academic readership – assumptions, in other words, that it is not necessary to defend or even spell out – there is indeed little need for him to provide more generalisations or theoretical reflection.
- [12] As it turns out, unfortunately, at least some of the tacit assumptions behind Mangham’s arguments cannot thus be taken for granted. One of them, especially, is likely to be considered untenable by not just the present reviewer but also most other readers of *Violent Women*. Most generally put, it has to do with representativeness and concerns the question of to what extent and in which respects a character in a sensation novel can be seen as representative of a particular social group. To what extent, that is, and in which respects, can he or she be regarded as a social type or even the embodiment of a social ideal? It should be obvious that the answer to this question must vary from novel to novel, character to character, perhaps even scene to scene, and that in each case it needs to be carefully established on the basis of verbal, generic, or other textual and contextual hints.
- [13] Instead of doing so, however, Mangham often and without any justification presupposes a highly implausible maximum of representativeness – for instance when discussing *St Martin’s Eve* in chapter two: »Yet, unlike Constance«, he claims there, »Charlotte inherits her father’s insanity, thus questioning the idea that insanity is mostly transferred through *female* lines of descent« (p. 77). »Mostly« does not mean ›always‹, obviously. Hence there is actually no reason whatsoever for Mangham to see any »questioning« of said »idea« in the case of Charlotte St John – unless he presupposes that every violent madwoman in a sensation novel is expected by contemporary readers fully to conform to the ideological stereotype he identified earlier in his book, all the way down to statistical probability, that is; and that even the slightest deviation from this

stereotype, rather than perhaps calling for a modification of the latter, automatically constitutes an act of subversion. In view of such assumptions about texts that quite ostensibly focus on the extraordinary, most readers will miss at least a preliminary discussion of what Mangham means by »questioning« or »subversive« in the first place.

[14]

More Complex Example, Same Problem

- [15] A more complex example of the problem that also highlights the occasional forcedness of Mangham's readings can be found in his claims about *East Lynne*. The ideologically conformist blame Mrs Wood apportions to the novel's heroine is seriously qualified, in Mangham's view, by the combined evidence of firstly, two magazine articles that – around the time of the novel's publication – implicitly question the dominant ›two spheres‹ ideology and systematic exclusion of women from the world of business; secondly, the triggering of the heroine's disastrous and unfounded jealousy by, precisely, her husband's discretion about a business matter; thirdly, the husband hiding his agitation when confronted with said jealousy at his wife's deathbed; and, fourthly, a vague resemblance of their relative difference in physical strength during this deathbed scene to that between the maternally dubious heroine and her now deceased baby in an earlier scene. According to Mangham, »the prevailing notion of women as deceitful and misleading is reinterpreted here so that it is the man, not the woman, being the most duplicitous«, men are shown to cause »their own failures«, and the novel thus »highlights the shortfalls inherent to bourgeois masculinity« (p. 136).
- [16] Although lucidly presented and varied in kind, Mangham's evidence looks thin and far-fetched on this occasion. Especially his fourth point seems spectacularly weak both on its own and in conjunction with the others. Yet even if Wood had indeed apportioned a small amount of blame to the »noble« but somewhat rigid husband in *East Lynne* (p. 489), this would scarcely constitute a challenging of »bourgeois masculinity«. After all – as Mangham himself reminds us later in his chapter, namely on p. 163 where he quotes from Samuel Smiles's middle-class manifesto *Self-Help* – the gentleman's kind indulgence towards »those subordinate to him« (i.e. women, children, servants) formed an integral part of this ideal. Consequently, its absence in a particular case could safely be criticised by even the staunchest proponent of the establishment. Contrary to Mangham's implicit premise here, the flawed male protagonist of a sensation novel may not in every case represent the oppressive ideal of Victorian masculinity. He could also be a man whose behaviour falls short of it.

[17]

The Problem in Different Guises

- [18] In some cases, Mangham's implausibly sweeping presuppositions should perhaps be regarded as merely the result of him overstating his case. One would, for example, have to agree to several doubtful premises in order to find acceptable his argument that »by setting ›Under the Sycamores‹ in the colonies of North America, Braddon appears to suggest that images of female, insane violence were inseparable from the schemes of self-advancement and progress held by the male population« (p. 96). In particular, one would have to agree that, in the eyes of contemporary readers, colonial North America typically represented the masculine endeavours outlined, and also that whenever two cultural phenomena are depicted in conjunction by a literary text, this is meant to suggest they are intrinsically related and mutually interdependent. However, if one replaced Mangham's »inseparable from« with ›sometimes connected with‹ (just as one probably should on p. 92 by the way), the problem would largely disappear.
- [19] Other faulty premises may result from Mangham reading into, rather than in, his sources – a distinction that is no less important because it is ultimately rooted in convention (Mangham himself endorses it on p. 2). Thus, when reading Francis Galton, he interprets a didactic metaphor designed to illustrate the concept of a ›hybrid‹ as »support for the idea of retaining traditional social formations and a warning against cross-class reproduction« (p. 35). Given Galton's notoriety as a promoter of eugenics and anthropometrics, one might perhaps expect such political innuendos from his work, but they are certainly not evident in this particular metaphor. It consists of a contrast between, on the one hand, a watering place in successful fusion with a seaside town and, on the other, the same watering place's failure lastingly to accommodate industrial manufacturing. Instead of the obvious factors of industrial pollution and the related health hazards, Mangham points towards class differences as the implied source of said failure – as if the fishmongers, sailors, and prostitutes of a seaside town were socially homogenous with the upper-classes taking the waters. Here as elsewhere – whether they manifest themselves through forced interpretations, oversimplifications of Victorian ideology, or mere exaggerations – Mangham's presuppositions would very much have profited from being spelled out and discussed. Such explicitness might have induced him to qualify some of them and perhaps convincingly defend others, not to mention made it easier for the reader to follow his arguments.

[20]

Formalities and Conclusion

- [21] Last and indeed least, though one cannot ignore such matters entirely, there are various textual faults for which the book's publisher has to take part of the blame. Apart from some typographical errors and the odd stylistic lapse – on p. 140 a »downward trajectory« is »detonated«, and on p. 151 a »chronological synchronicity« revealed – *Violent Women* contains a great number of awkward prepositional clauses involving »as with«, »like«, etc. which at times, in sentences such as »Unlike *The Woman in White*, however, the likeness between Rupert and James is purely coincidental« (p. 110) culminate in the downright nonsensical.
- [22] While still only slightly aggravated by such minor linguistic flaws, the more central argumentative weaknesses of the book cannot but diminish its overall persuasiveness. Nevertheless, the sheer wealth of associations it offers, the highly varied and often fascinating sources it adduces, and not least its close engagement with several little-known sensation novels do much to highlight the violent madwoman's ubiquity in the fields of journalism and popular fiction. Successfully tracing her mythical presence in the kitchens and drawing rooms located just below the loftier attics of canonical literature, Mangham's remains a worthwhile addition to the scholarship on the subject and likely to be built on in future research.

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Anmerkungen

- 1 The full titles of the above-mentioned works are, respectively, Sandra M. Gilbert / Susan Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP 1978; Elaine Showalter: *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture*. New York: Pantheon 1985; Janet Oppenheim: »Shattered Nerves«: *Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England*. Oxford: OUP 1991; Helen Small: *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800–1865*. Oxford: Clarendon 1996; Michel Foucault: *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961). Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Random House 1973; Andrew Maunder / Grace Moore (eds): *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*. London: Ashgate 2004. [zurück](#)
- 2 Mangham quotes from Wynne's »See What a Big Wide Bed it is! Mrs Henry Wood and the Philistine Imagination«. In: Emma Liggins / Daniel Duffy (eds): *Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts*. London: Ashgate 2001, pp. 89–107: p. 95, as well as her study: *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2001, p. 70. [zurück](#)