Plotting the News in the Victorian Novel by Jessica R. Valdez (review)

Helena Goodwyn

Victorian Periodicals Review, Volume 54, Number 1, Spring 2021, pp. 154-157 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/vpr.2021.0008

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Bassett demonstrates how new fiction published in inexpensive one-volume editions gained prestige and became a viable alternative to the circulating library. Bassett also draws on case studies to show how publishers made increasingly sophisticated use of the series, including Unwin’s Pseudonym Library and John Lane’s Keynotes, to market new fiction outside the circulating library system in the 1890s.

Some scholars may be concerned that some of these results are not entirely new. John Sutherland anticipates Bassett’s finding that the three-volume novel persisted for most of the nineteenth century because it was a fairly safe commercial bet. And Elaine Showalter, hypothesizing that men reacted to the matriarchy of George Eliot, anticipates his finding that women wrote the majority of triple deckers by the end of the century only to be ousted by men like Stevenson and Haggard who were writing one-volume romances. However, we should not shy away from gathering larger datasets because in some (though not all) cases the data will confirm what we have intuited from individual case studies.

While working with numbers and bigger data can provide a more comprehensive overview than has been previously available, data—like traditional methods of literary analysis—does not provide a final answer. This methodology is still interpretive and susceptible to lacunae in the records and places where we might wish for better data. In some cases, more data may prove impossible: the records of Hurst and Blackett and Mudie’s, for example, no longer survive. But gathering what data we can, though a laborious task, can give us a fuller picture of the place of the triple decker in Victorian literature and culture. This approach has the potential both to move our understanding beyond the case study and to complement those case studies with a broader context. It is to be hoped that Bassett’s methodology will inspire more Victorianists to undertake data-driven analyses as the digitization of nineteenth-century records makes this approach increasingly possible.

Karen Bourrier
University of Calgary


In the opening pages of *Plotting the News in the Victorian Novel*, Jessica R. Valdez takes issue with Benedict Anderson’s seminal study *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Chief amongst the defects of Anderson’s most famous work, Valdez
believes, is the formal nature of his analysis. In this regard, Valdez argues, Anderson sees no difference “between the fictiveness of the novel and that of the newspaper” (4). Moreover, Anderson “fails to attend to textual and generic specifics as well as theories of how these media work,” and “he collapses distinctions between the novel and the newspaper and treats them as stable categories” (3, 4). Whether or not one agrees with Valdez’s assessment of Anderson’s work, Plotting the News thus positions itself as providing a corrective to Anderson’s theory of the nation via an interrogation of “the nineteenth-century novel’s varying approaches to conceiving the newspaper as a form, system, genre, or collection of genres” (6). Further, Valdez explains that her monograph examines “scholarly claims that the novel and the newspaper analogue the nation in parallel ways” (3); “suggests that novelistic depictions of newspapers represent a continued project of articulating and theorizing narrative realisms” (6); and presents “a story of the novel . . . not a history of the periodical or the newspaper” (17).

As such, Valdez straddles a position somewhere between the New Historicist and New Formalist perspectives that Rachael Scarborough King so adroitly identifies in her recent review essay in the Los Angeles Review of Books. Scarborough King reviews three books: Daniel Shore’s Cyberformalism: Histories of Linguistic Forms in the Digital Archive (2018), Anna Kornbluh’s The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space (2019), and Aaron Kunin’s Character as Form (2019). Engaging with Kornbluh’s monograph, which takes much of its evidence from the nineteenth century, Scarborough King writes: “Forms exist across registers, but literary texts make particularly clear how crucial they are to the construction of a shared world. Rather than borrowing from historical or sociological methods, literary critics should affirm the literary” (“The Frontiers of Form,” Los Angeles Review of Books, September 19, 2020). And formalism, according to Kornbluh, is the best method for doing so.

We can see from this summary of the New Formalist mode how such a position relates to Valdez’s thesis that “many nineteenth-century novels explore the effects of form making on characters and communities” (20). Chapter one of Valdez’s “story of the novel” argues that Charles Dickens was an author who, despite or perhaps because of his many years working in journalism, increasingly “valorised the artifice involved in narrative constructions of imagined worlds” (27).

Chapter two, “Arrested Development: Characterisation, the Newspaper and Anthony Trollope,” examines Trollope’s fictional depictions of journalists and newspapers. Valdez takes on Matthew Rubery’s The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News (2009), asserting that Rubery’s thesis considers “Trollope’s fictional newspapers” as “often foster[ing] a ‘whispering conscience’ in his characters” (89). By contrast, Valdez contends that in The Warden (1855) and the Palliser nov-
els, newspapers do not facilitate shifts in the conscience of their characters but rather they immobilize them, and any development thereafter is in spite of, rather than because of, journalistic intervention. Valdez writes persuasively of Plantagenet Palliser’s alienation and Septimus Harding’s awakening to the privilege of his position. However, this reviewer finds no real disagreement between Valdez’s argument and Rubery’s that Trollope depicts newspapers as “invasive,” disruptive documents that occasion “crise de conscience” in characters who encounter “opposing arguments” in the press and are paralysed as a result (Rubery, The Novelty of Newspapers [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 102, 103, 96). Rubery argues that Trollope represents the journalist and the newspaper press as perniciously one-sided to create a deliberate “foil” for the novel and the authorial voice which, in Trollope’s fiction at least, presents a multiplicity of viewpoints and a space for characters to deliberate (Rubery, 106). For Valdez, too, the “two-dimensional” newspaper causes a “crisis of conscience” in Trollope’s characters, which leads to the conclusion that only “novelistic poetics” can represent the necessary heterogeneity of society (77, 76, 81).

Chapter three focuses on two famous examples of sensation fiction: Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Aurora Floyd (1862–63) and Wilkie Collins’s Armadale (1864–66). Valdez sets Armadale in conversation with Elizabeth Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters (1864–66) in the context of their publication alongside each other in the Cornhill Magazine. The analysis in this chapter, which draws out sensational elements in Gaskell’s “Every-Day Story,” chimes with the work of Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge in “The Plot Thickens: Toward a Narratological Analysis of Illustrated Serial Fiction in the 1860s,” which concentrates on “illustration and layout as key constituents of plot rather than mere bibliographical paratext” (Victorian Studies 51, no. 1 [2008]: 68). Leighton and Surridge demonstrate that as Wives and Daughters moved to lead serial in the Cornhill in July 1865, taking over from Armadale, “[George] Du Maurier’s illustrations deploy sensational effects in Gaskell’s realist text to suggest Molly’s unconventional behaviour” (Leighton and Surridge, 95).

The final chapter of Plotting the News reflects on the position of the Anglo-Jewish community in nineteenth-century London as refracted through the Jewish Standard, George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1876), and Israel Zangwill’s Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People (1892)—which is missing from the book’s bibliography. Valdez also compares Zangwill’s editor-character Raphael Leon to Eliot’s Will Ladislaw from Middlemarch (1871–72).

Concluding with a postscript and a return to theoretical deliberations about form, Valdez stages a disagreement with Caroline Levine’s Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network (2015). She pits Levine’s concept of
forms as necessarily containing limitations as well as possibilities against her own, before ultimately agreeing that literary forms can ascribe “particular sets of potentialities” just as they can challenge and modify too (169).

Whilst *Plotting the News* might have benefitted from having fewer antagonists and rather more interlocuters, it is an inventive, thought-provoking investigation of a variety of nineteenth-century novels in dialogue with the evolution of the newspaper press.

Helena Goodwyn  
Northumbria University


After Sherlock Holmes disappeared over the Reichenbach Falls, his absence left a gaping void in the marketplace for detective fiction. This void is the starting point for Clare Clarke’s engaging study of the 1890s short story series, which offered alternative manifestations of the detective and crime plots so popular with late Victorian readers. Before Holmes’s resurrection in 1901 in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, new detective figures took his place in the pages of fin de siècle periodicals: lavish monthlies like the *Strand Magazine* and the *Windsor*, but also weekend miscellanies, urban daily newspapers, and provincial weeklies. The book develops discussions from Clarke’s earlier monograph, *Late Victorian Crime Fiction in the Shadows of Sherlock* (2014), which challenged the cosy reputation of crime fiction between 1886 and 1900; this second investigation pursues notions of narrative complexity and the blurring of boundaries between detective fiction and other popular genres, such as the ghost story, adventure stories, and slum fiction. This is an ambitious and diverse study that places detective fiction in its broader periodical contexts and makes an important contribution to a growing critical field.

The six case studies focus on the writing of L. T. Meade, C. L. (Catherine Louisa) Pirkis, Arthur Morrison, Fergus Hume, Richard Marsh, and mother-and-son duo Kate Prichard and Hesketh Vernon Hesketh-Prichard (under the pseudonyms E. and H. Heron). Clarke adds to recent discussions of Meade, Hume, and Marsh in relation to the city, poverty, and contamination by critics such as Christopher Pittard and Minna Vuohelainen; she provides a broader vision of the periodical landscape, genre hybridities, and the gendering of detection in her surveys of key stories and her close attention to reviews and readerships. Her extensive knowledge of Victo-