Victorian Freaks
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This last section asks questions about the literary and photographic—and thus, cultural—production of freaks, of their embodiment in various kinds of “text.” Through English fiction and through images, we can plumb the politics of material representation of freakery in nineteenth-century England. Martha Stoddard Holmes’s essay takes up Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins’s depictions of both marriage and the disabled body to ask questions about how the “irregular” and freakish were not simply sites of charity but also of eroticism. Melissa Free looks at both Collins and Charles Dickens to ask how the enfreaked characters demonstrate anxieties that underscore notions of freakishness when they suggestively represent alternative sexualities. Both of these essays build upon the broader social notions of English identity and freakery offered in previous sections. Finally, Christopher Smit closes the collection with a provocative theoretical discussion that challenges notions of freak representation and volition in the foundational work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and others, reading the freaks as active and enabled participants in their own production.
Irregularity marks the marriage plot that is the core of Wilkie Collins’s *The Law and the Lady*. If domestic novels often seal their happy endings with marriage, this one uses the conjugal rite to set its problems in motion. The first chapter, inauspiciously titled “The Bride’s Mistake,” introduces Valeria Brinton, one of Collins’s heroines of “irregular features,” whose excesses (“too pale” of complexion, “too dark” of hair and brows) generate the use of “too” nine times in five sentences of description. The groom, Eustace Woodville, is also presented as distinctive in demeanor and body; he is melancholy and prematurely bald, and he walks with a limp. The newlyweds’ emotional dynamic and the early days of their marriage are also atypical, even in the context of Victorian culture. Both are “bewildered” after the ceremony, and the groom is tearful in the honeymoon carriage. Valeria’s mistake—signing the marriage register with her married, not maiden, name—foreshadows a much more serious irregularity in this marriage. On the honeymoon, a meeting with a stranger who turns out to be Valeria’s mother-in-law leads to the discovery that her husband has married her under a false name; he is really Eustace Macallan. When Eustace refuses to tell Valeria his reasons for the deception, she discovers through some very creative private detective work that he has been tried for the murder of
his first wife, Sara, and still bears the stigma of a Scottish “not proven” verdict. Finally, after Valeria confronts him with what she has learned of his troubles and reaffirms her love for him, Eustace disappears, leaving behind an apologetic letter advising his wife to seek an annulment. The opening narrative of newlywed happiness is thus truncated, leaving room for a much different story to enter and inhabit the novel. Instead of being about love and marriage, most of *The Law and the Lady* is about Valeria Macallan’s search outside of marriage for the evidence that will allow her to normalize her husband’s irregular public identity and thus begin her domestic life.

The search leads her to one of the most interesting characters Wilkie Collins ever created. Miserrimus Dexter’s first appearance in the novel, in the pages of the report Valeria reads of Eustace’s trial, returns a frisson of actual sensation to the sensation novel: “Gliding, self-propelled in his chair on wheels, through the opening made for him among the crowd, a strange and startling creature—literally the half of a man—revealed himself to the general view. A coverlid, which had been thrown over his chair, had fallen off during his progress through the throng. The loss of it exposed to the public curiosity the head, the arms, and the trunk of a living human being: absolutely deprived of the lower limbs.”

If by 1875 a murder trial in a sensation novel is for readers a pleasurably familiar encounter with a genre convention, Dexter’s extraordinary body offers a disruptive new kind of reading pleasure. Bilaterally limb-deficient from birth, he is also a gender puzzle:

To make this deformity all the more striking and all the more terrible, the victim of it was—as to his face and his body—an unusually handsome and an unusually well-made man. His long silky hair, of a bright and beautiful chestnut color, fell over shoulders that were the perfection of strength and grace. His face was bright with vivacity and intelligence. His large clear blue eyes and his long delicate white hands were like the eyes and hands of a beautiful woman. He would have looked effeminate but for the manly proportions of his throat and chest, aided in their effect by his flowing beard and long mustache, of a lighter chestnut shade than the color of his hair. Never had a magnificent head and body been more hopelessly ill-bestowed than in this instance! Never had Nature committed a more careless or a more cruel mistake than in the making of this man! (173)

Appearance is only the first layer in Dexter’s many fascinations, but my purpose is to explore only one of them: his complex relationship to
Valeria’s disrupted marriage plot. I will argue for Dexter’s centrality not simply to the puzzle of who killed Sara Macallan but more crucially to the novel’s endorsement of irregular bodies, relationships, and situations as the powerful and pleasurable foundations of Victorian social life. As the limit case in a continuum of social and sexual behaviors explored, indulged, and finally repudiated by the plot, Miserrimus Dexter functions as a queer sort of marital aid. The desires associated with his extraordinary body and unconventional behavior are essential to the success of Valeria’s middle-class marriage, even if she must relinquish these desires, and Dexter himself, by the novel’s end.

In making this argument, I diverge from recent critics’ emphasis on Dexter as a character whose meaning derives from the history of “monsters” and “freaks,” as well as from my usual critical practice of reading atypically embodied Victorian characters as “disabled,” with meanings to be elaborated by looking at the historical record of disability’s formation as a socioeconomic category and a social identity. Rather than either domesticated freak or disabled person, I choose to read Dexter as a queer and “critically” disabled character. Through his atypical body’s work as desire’s instrument, conduit, and register, Dexter generates important messages about the failures of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness as social systems.

Accordingly, while my analysis shares most scholars’ focus on the long period in which Valeria is separated from her husband, my concerns are different from theirs. The core of the novel is usually regarded as the “detective” narrative in which Valeria’s adventures allow her to accumulate the evidence that ultimately clears her husband’s name of any suspicion of having murdered his wife. In contrast, I am more interested in the contexts in which Valeria gathers these clues and the other knowledge she accumulates in the process. While The Law and the Lady is indeed a detective story, propelled by the suspense of the genre, it is also an excursion into a world of nonnormative, nonmarital pleasures and miseries. The curiosity and desire of detection set the novel and Valeria in motion, but these energies soon diverge from the limited object of clearing Eustace’s name and spill out toward far more enticing objects. While Eustace is away, the novel luxuriates in Valeria’s separate but not solitary growth as a woman who is neither married nor single, with a group of “odd” and—I will argue—“queer” men, of whom Dexter forms the core; he is only the most visible thread in a fabric of queerness that organizes and gives substance to this marriage plot.

Through Dexter, Collins affirms the literal and figurative reliance
of marriage on practices and characters marked as marginal or even antithetical to the system of compulsory heterosexuality. Hetero-able normativity, as Collins posits it, clearly relies on the queer, disabled energy Dexter generates: not just to point out its limits but actually to keep it—and its institutions—running. If detection clears Eustace’s name, queerness revives the marriage, even while unveiling its flaws. Valeria’s development in relation to these men reinstates her marriage, while suffusing that reinstatement with a sense of loss.

My exploration of the particular gender/sexuality/ability trouble that Dexter generates is guided by Robert McRuer’s concept of “queer theory and critical disability.” McRuer posits compulsory able-bodiedness as a correlate to Adrienne Rich’s compulsory heterosexuality: No one achieves either impossible state of “full” heterosexuality or able-bodiedness, but these dominant identities are nonetheless naturalized as essential and normal states that produce the alternatives (or “aberrances”) of queerness and disability. Working with the ideas of Judith Butler, McRuer further argues for the social compulsion to continue the practices that constitute the two “impossible” identities of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, so that noticeable gaps occur when someone fails to perform them. Queerness and disability are not simply parallel identities but by-products of mutually dependent systems: “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness.”

McRuer draws both on Butler and on Michael Warner’s critique of heteronormacy to posit a key distinction between “virtual” and “critical” disability perspectives: “In contrast to a virtually queer identity, which would be experienced by anyone who failed to perform heterosexuality without contradiction and incoherence (i.e. everyone), a critically queer perspective could presumably mobilize the inevitable failure to approximate the norm.” Similarly, “everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are impossible to achieve fully and because we will all experience disability if we live long enough,” but critical or “severe” disability would mobilize the gaps between the normative and disabled body to generate “ability trouble” that might move us to “[reimagine and reshape] the limited forms of embodiment and desire proffered by the systems that would contain us all.”

As I will illustrate, Collins’s work is full of such gaps, playfully and painfully wedged open by the performative presence of Miserrimus Dexter. We can view Dexter’s refusals and failures to participate fully in
heterosexuality or able-bodiedness as a critique of these systems and their cruel compulsions. As Collins develops Dexter as an integral and significant character, not simply a “material metaphor” who generates a story on others’ behalf, Miserrimus’s performances affirm his membership in the human community whose institutions he illuminates.  

In calling Dexter “queer,” or “critically disabled,” and later using the terms “camp” and “crip,” I consciously deploy usages and words that were absent in 1875. I will close by arguing, however, that a socially responsible reading of Dexter dictates the anachronism. While a key tenet of disability studies has been to recover disabled people’s history and the historical dynamism of disability as a social category, historicist (rather than metaphoric or essentialist) readings of literary representations of human variation can be necessary but not sufficient as a means to more ethical scholarship.

Analyses that work analogically, by finding (for example) a historical figure “like” Dexter to use as a key to his meaning, can be particularly problematic. If there is a noticeable disjunction between the character and his or her historical analogue, this interpretive method can actually counteract the goal of reinstating disabled people into history. The analogue can be a Procrustean analytical bed whose effect is to reinscribe disability as an essential difference in persons rather than as a representational mode, minority group identity, or civil rights issue. History that does not fit can appear to humanize, while firmly redrawing the able/disabled binary and boundary. This has been the case with Miserrimus Dexter. Only a reading that makes use of our present theoretical moment can unpack the character, much less the novel’s usefulness as a tool for social justice.

Valeria first encounters Dexter in a book in the library of a Major Fitz-David who forms the primary connection between her family and Eustace’s. An old friend of Valeria’s uncle whose evasive response to inquiries about Eustace before the wedding caused the uncle to advise against the marriage, Fitz-David is Valeria’s first good lead in her quest for the truth about why Eustace has married her under a false name. Taking with her person (Valeria has for the first time in her life applied makeup, intuiting that it will help her appeal to the aging roué), Fitz-David leaves her alone in the library to make her own search, secretly watching her through a partly closed door.

Dexter’s vehement defense of Eustace in the trial report inspires Valeria to find and speak to him. She visits with Dexter four times, in the course of which he cooks for her; composes and performs a song
in her honor; misleads her regarding the truth about Sara Macallan’s death; makes sexual advances toward her; and inspires her interest, disgust, pity, fear, anger, compassion, and forgiveness, before giving her, against his will and in the context of his mental dissolution, the key to the buried evidence of the truth that will restore Eustace’s good name. In the process, Dexter also gives Valeria training in the range of practices, pleasures, and sorrows that can characterize adult relationships.

“The Hero of My Dreams”

Valeria first visits Dexter in the company of her mother-in-law, who offers a modicum of support for her husband’s deserted wife. The chapters aptly titled “Miserrimus Dexter: First View” and “Miserrimus Dexter: Second View” continue the court report’s pattern of tracing the visual details of Dexter’s body in appraisal and erotic appreciation:

I saw plainly now the bright intelligent face and the large clear blue eyes, the lustrous waving hair of a light chestnut color, the long delicate white hands, and the magnificent throat and chest. . . . The deformity which degraded and destroyed the manly beauty of his head and breast was hidden from view by an Oriental robe of many colors, thrown over the chair like a coverlid. He was clothed in a jacket of black velvet, fastened loosely across his chest with large malachite buttons; and he wore lace ruffles at the ends of his sleeves, in the fashion of the last century. . . . The one defect that I could discover in his face was at the outer corners of his eyes, just under the temple. Here when he laughed, and in a lesser degree when he smiled, the skin contracted into quaint little wrinkles and folds, which looked strangely out of harmony with the almost youthful appearance of the rest of his face. . . . Speaking of him . . . from a woman’s point of view I can only describe him as being an unusually handsome man. . . . A young girl, ignorant of what the Oriental robe hid from view, would have said to herself, the instant she looked at him, “Here is the hero of my dreams!” (213–14)

A few of the layers of Valeria’s appreciation bear comment. First, the pleasure encompassing comments about “deformity” and “defect” is based on attributes that, like the earlier passage, describe a beauty not dependent upon Dexter’s overtly manly parts, and the manly parts them-
selves are the site of wonderful ambiguity. Some critics interpret the last passage to mean that the Oriental robe hides a nothing, the absence of a penis. As he is described as born “legless,” however, I would suggest that the passage is equally legible as saying that the robe hides the end of Dexter’s torso and the sockets of his hips—or even, that “what the Oriental robe hid” is what it would hide in any adult male: Valeria here articulates “a young girl’s” premarital ignorance of what male genitals look like—an ignorance she presumably can no longer claim.

If the first inference is correct, however, how much queerer a situation emerges, one in which the links between biological sex, cultural gender, sexual practices, and the larger realm of desire are inescapably broken. Regardless of how we read the scene, it affirms McRuer’s assertion of the mutual imbrication of sexual orientation and disability, both of which it troubles along with gender norms. As Teresa Mangum asserts, “His unclear sexual status and complex gendering are presented as his greatest deformities, motivating the spectator’s guilty gaze.” This is a scene whose queerness is generated by Dexter’s hybrid appearance, which inconsistently traverses the registers of disability, gender, and age; it is fully mobilized, however, by relational looking. It cannot be located solely in Miserrimus as an object, but it has to be equally anchored in Valeria (and the readers) who objectify him in curious and desiring ways.

“What are those things, Mr. Dexter? and are we really going to eat them?”

On the next visit, following Valeria’s similar appraisal of him, Miserrimus elaborates the queerness of his social body:

I have dressed, expressly to receive you, in the prettiest clothes I have. Don’t be surprised. Except in this ignoble and material nineteenth century, men have always worn precious stuffs and beautiful colors as well as women. A hundred years ago a gentleman in pink silk was a gentleman properly dressed. Fifteen hundred years ago the patricians of the classic times wore bracelets exactly like mine. I despise the brutish contempt for beauty and the mean dread of expense which degrade a gentleman’s costume to black cloth, and limit a gentleman’s ornaments to a finger-ring, in the age I live in. I like to be bright and beautiful, especially when brightness and beauty come to see me. (232)
As Dennis Denisoff has noted, Dexter here is doing what we would now term “camping it up,” consciously troubling the gender conventions of his time, not simply through dress but also through practices such as embroidery, which he does to compose himself when the conversation agitates him. In Butler’s terms, he has moved from “virtually” to “critically” queer. Later, Dexter dons a white cap and apron, pours Valeria a goblet of Clos Vougeot, “the king of burgundies,” and cooks her the first truffles Valeria has ever eaten:

He pierced and produced to view some little irregularly formed black objects, which might have been familiar enough to a woman accustomed to the luxurious tables of the rich; but which were a new revelation to a person like myself. . . . When I saw my host carefully lay out these occult substances of uninviting appearance on a clean napkin, and then plunge once more into profound reflection at the sight of them, my curiosity could be no longer restrained. I ventured to say, “What are those things, Mr. Dexter? and are we really going to eat them?”

He started at the rash question, and looked at me, with hands outspread in irrepressible astonishment.

“Where is our boasted progress?” he cried. “What is education but a name? Here is a cultivated person who doesn’t know Truffles when she sees them!”

“I have heard of truffles,” I answered, humbly, “but I never saw them before. We had no such foreign luxuries as those, Mr. Dexter, at home in the North.”

Miserrimus Dexter lifted one of the truffles tenderly on his spike, and held it up to me in a favorable light. “Make the most of one of the few first sensations in this life which has no ingredient of disappointment lurking under the surface,” he said. (245–46)

While he cooks, Valeria explores the macabre curiosities that decorate his room, including plaster casts of murderers, “a frightful little skeleton of a woman,” and the skin of a Marquis. Not surprisingly, she finds the truffles less than savory after this appetizer: “On the marble slab were two plates, two napkins, two rolls of bread—and a dish, with another napkin on it, on which reposed two quaint little black balls. Miserrimus Dexter, regarding me with a smile of benevolent interest, put one of the balls on my plate, and took the other himself. ‘Compose yourself, Mrs. Valeria,’ he said. ‘This is an epoch in your life. Your first Truffle! Don’t touch it with the knife. Use the fork alone. And—pardon me;
this is most important—eat slowly.’ I followed my instructions, and assumed an enthusiasm which I honestly confess I did not feel.” (248)

The luxuriant scene develops both Collins’s hobbyhorse of the superiority of French to British culture and, more significantly, the growing relationship between a confidently queer man and a resilient young woman whose marital traumas have not dulled her readiness to explore life. It is exactly the kind of scene that might have developed Valeria and Eustace’s marriage. The relationship between Dexter and Valeria is not unlike Carolyn Dever’s description of the “affirmative, loving, nonmarital bonds” between same-sex couples that are a regular feature of Collins’s marriage plots.15

Crippling It Up

Dexter’s camping it up is interwoven with wonderful scenes in which Dexter uses his social body and the gazes that constitute it in a conscious, critical way that returns power to him—“cripping it up,” as it were. Aware of Valeria’s transfixed gaze, he decides that rather than explode in his pink coat, he will exercise:

In an instant he was down on the floor, poised on his hands, and looking in the distance like a monstrous frog. Hopping down the room, he overthrew, one after another, all the smaller and lighter chairs as he passed them; arrived at the end, he turned, surveyed the prostrate chairs, encouraged himself with a scream of triumph, and leaped rapidly over chair after chair on his hands—his limbless body now thrown back from the shoulders, and now thrown forward to keep the balance—in a manner at once wonderful and horrible to behold. “Dexter's Leap-frog!” he cried, cheerfully, perching himself with his birdlike lightness on the last of the prostrate chairs when he had reached the further end of the room. “I’m pretty active, Mrs. Valeria, considering I’m a cripple.” (259)

Later, he courts and counters the stares of the household of Benjamin, the aged bachelor and family friend in whose house Valeria resides after her husband leaves her. Valeria and Benjamin return home to find a distraught and offended housemaid complaining of a “Thing” having been carried into the library that “curdled my blood.” Valeria finds Dexter “arrayed in his pink jacket, fast asleep in Benjamin’s favourite armchair! No coverlid hid his horrible deformity. Nothing was sacrificed
to conventional ideas of propriety, in his extraordinary dress. I could hardly wonder that the poor old housekeeper trembled from head to foot when she spoke of him” (292). Upon being disturbed, Dexter smiles “as innocently as a waking child” and greets Valeria sweetly, then disarms and discomposes Benjamin before the other gentleman can say a word: “‘Excuse my getting up, sir. . . . I can’t get up—I have no legs. You look as if you thought I was occupying your chair? If I am committing an intrusion, be so good as to put your umbrella under me, and give me a jerk. I shall fall on my hands, and Ishan’t be offended with you. I will submit to a tumble and a scolding—but please don’t break my heart by sending me away’” (293). Directing his comments both at Benjamin and at the reader, Dexter both embodies the disabled body’s failure to conform to expectations and calls our attention to the gaps. This might be what moving from “virtual” to “critical” disability might look like.

**Fab Four:**

*Queer Eye for the New Wife of an Accused Murderer*

The surprise with which other characters greet Dexter can distract us from noticing his multiple affinities with the other men in the plot, many of whom are simply closer to normative on the normative-queer continuum they share with the novel’s most extreme character. Dexter seems extraordinary with his beautiful garments and bracelets, his “Black Museum” of Sadean objects and his paintings of cruelty. The aging roué Fitz-David, however, is queer by degrees, with his moustache and eyebrows dyed to match his brown wig, his meticulous and beautiful dress, and the album Valeria finds on her search for the court report. Fitz-David’s album, in which he commemorates his past dalliances with locks of hair and the dates on which he broke things off with the women in question, is no less a fetish collection than Dexter’s skins, only less extreme. Further, Fitz-David is a friend of Valeria’s clergyman uncle, and both Fitz-David and Dexter are Eustace’s friends, thus connecting not only Fitz-David but also Dexter with the novel’s larger male community.

Dexter, with his pink jacket, perverse wit, and unabashed elitism about beauty and cuisine, combines with Fitz-David, Benjamin, and the lawyer Playfair to form a sort of Victorian *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* crew. They give Valeria the secret to her husband’s innocence, but they also provide her another possible secret to marriage: its need
for an excursion into that which is not marriage, the ebullient and erotically charged life they inhabit. These men—or Fab Four—initiate and transform Valeria in ways not dissimilar to how *Queer Eye*’s Fab Five initiated and transformed various unhygienic, hair-troubled men with underdeveloped social and sartorial skills. If the Fab Five molded these fellows into men who could propose to their girlfriends, stop embarrassing their teenage daughters, or catch up with their hip wives, Dexter et al. introduce Valeria to the pleasures of the adult world, including makeup, grooming, cuisine, and couture.

Collins’s queer world does not exclude women or married people. Valeria evolves a substantial interest in and attraction for Mrs. Helena Beauly, whom Eustace desired and would have married (had he not married his first wife Sara to save Sara’s reputation after she had behaved immodestly out of passion for him). Helena is desirable not only because she is the woman Eustace desired before her, nor because she may hold a clue to Sara’s death, but also because she is a woman who has adventures, such as disguising herself as her maid in order to visit a masked ball—“not at all a reputable affair” including “all sorts of amusing people . . . ladies of doubtful virtue . . . and gentlemen on the outlying limits of society” (267). Another representative of this social circle is Lady Clarinda, who recounts Helena’s adventure and dismisses as “What stuff!” Eustace’s disapproval of the masked ball. Only briefly in the plot, Lady Clarinda is nonetheless a character Valeria takes the time to describe physically in great detail. The younger woman notes that Clarinda wears her hair exactly like Valeria’s, and she speculates on Clarinda’s mix of elite breeding and simplicity: “If you had accepted her for what she was, on the surface, you would have said, Here is the model of a noble woman who is perfectly free from pride. And if you had taken a liberty with her, on the strength of that conviction, she would have made you remember it to the end of her your life” (264–65). The passage itself enacts Valeria’s imaginative taking of such a liberty, her interest in the woman and fear of being rebuffed.

Other women, including Eustace’s dead wife, draw Valeria’s attention as models of adult women’s passionate feelings. Karin Jacobson observes that Valeria’s knowledge of Sara’s unseen (because she is physically plain) desire “creates a space for the representation of a sexually desiring woman and . . . sanctions the representation of herself as sexually passionate for Eustace.” In fact, Sara is one of a series of displaced versions of herself Valeria sees, including Sara, Beauly, Dexter, Clarinda, Mrs. Macallan, and even Dexter’s intellectually disabled cousin Ariel
and Fitz-David's paramour Miss Hoightly. Her mimetic attraction to the women in Eustace's former social circle is yet another version of the queer desires the novel circulates.

Rejection: The Queer Scandal of Disabled Sexuality

In meeting these characters, Valeria acclimates herself to her husband's own social history. The goal of this education cannot be deferred forever, though many readers wish that it could. While the middle of the novel richly illustrates the idea of a continuum of fluid gendered and sexual identities, Collins does not leave us in a utopian realm of imagining that any place on the continuum is as acceptable as any other. I want to close with a passage that illustrates best of all how heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are, as McRuer argues, imbricated systems, and how these compulsions work in the context of The Law and the Lady.

When Dexter arrives uninvited in Benjamin's house, Valeria meets with him alone. He has by this time introduced Valeria to his own sexuality, but she has not narrated it as such, possibly to cover her own knowledge of what lies beneath the Oriental robe, or because of her inability or refusal to connect sexual desire with a disabled man. Dexter has queried her on the terms of the separation with her husband, contrived to have her move around the room so he can watch her walk, and noted her resemblance to Sara, the dead woman he loved; he has even grabbed her hand in agitation while discussing the trial. For her part, Valeria has noted his exceptional beauty; feared his mood changes; experienced his wild, bardic harp music; eaten his truffles and drunk his wine; and decided that he is not, despite others' assessment, mad. She has responded to his touch with chills and a rebuke. At the start of their conversation at Benjamin's house, then, Valeria's feelings for Dexter are clearly not limited to the compassion of an able-bodied woman for a disabled man.

In this scene, Dexter affirms his love for the dead Sara and his sorrow that anyone might suspect him of bringing about her death. When Valeria moves close to him, avowing she feels no such suspicion, he holds her hand and “devour[s] it with kisses” (299). Valeria's first-person account makes the scene immediate and sensory: “His lips burned me like fire. He twisted himself suddenly in the chair, and wound his arm around my waist” (299). For the Graphic, the illustrated “family” periodical in which the novel was first serialized, this was “an attempted
violation” of a heroine we soon find out is not just married but pregnant.\(^{18}\) I would suggest that the scandal is more complicated. The scene dramatizes the breaking of a particularly Victorian (and later) compact in which disabled people can be objects of sympathy and financial support as long as they refrain from disrupting a cultural frame that denies them agency and sexuality. Dexter’s advance, especially occurring in response to sympathy, is a direct violation of this social compact. In another layer, for this act to be truly “scandalous” it has to be a “stylized repetition” of a heteronormative and able-bodied act—“attempting to kiss the heroine.” This, of course, it is, as is Valeria’s initial rebuff. For the advance to be forgivable, however—and on the terms it is forgiven—is an indication of its ultimate failure. Dexter’s disability makes this a queer kind of scandal, as the close of the scene articulates.

When Benjamin arrives in response to her cry for help, Valeria says, “You can’t lay your hand on a cripple” (299), and watches from in hiding as Dexter’s servant takes him away: “The rough man lifted his master with a gentleness that surprised me. ‘Hide my face,’ I heard Dexter say to him, in broken tones. He opened his coarse pilot-jacket, and hid his master’s head under it, and so went silently out—with the deformed creature held to his bosom, like a woman sheltering her child” (300). While it domesticates and infantilizes Dexter, this last view also alerts us to the sadness and shame that are significant constituent factors in both queer and disabled identities within most cultural frameworks.\(^{19}\)

Here I want to touch again on the notion of compulsion rather than volition that Annamarie Jagose reminds us is central to Butler’s theories of the performance of gender.\(^{20}\) It is possible for much of the novel to simply delight in Dexter’s moments of camping and cripping it up as voluntary practices in which he pleases himself, partly through his control of social situations. Significantly, Collins continues to the point of the burning kisses that mark the limits of Dexter’s volition, and on to the image of him cradled in the arms of the servant. The novel thus reminds us that the dictates of “normal” sexualized behavior, especially in conjunction with atypical embodiment or any other socially stigmatized attribute, are only flexible up to a point. Beyond that point lies the shame of failure, itself as ritualized and compulsory as the successful kiss that Valeria and Eustace share early in the novel.

Valeria’s excursion into queer life, similarly, is not a playful or voluntary departure of marriage but one catalyzed by marital trauma and Eustace’s rejection. The biggest secret of the book overall, and the one Dexter imparts to this wife-in-training, may be not only the variety
of practices and pleasures that underpin human relationships but also the shame and sadness that pervade them, especially in the context of a regime of normalcy. Valeria’s rejection of Dexter’s queer, crippled body mirrors, as Jacobson points out, Sara’s rejection of Dexter and also Eustace’s rejection of Sara; it further suggests the fear Valeria has of Eustace’s rejection. The impossible ideal of a mutually desiring heterosexual union, then, exists nowhere in the rich fabric of mismatched desires, misunderstandings, depression, and failure that Collins charts so fully in this novel. No one achieves it: it is merely Dexter and Sara who are the unhappiest victims of the system of compulsory heterosexuality and bodily normalcy.

Despite her identification with Dexter’s experience, however, Valeria’s rejection of his queer, crippled body is necessary to shore up this impossible ideal. If Dexter invokes both a celebratory rejection of conventions and an abject failure to meet them, both subversion and failure are finally contained by convention. My reference to Queer Eye for the Straight Guy is purposefully connected to this dynamic. Nominally a celebration of queerness (and a fairly assimilationist version of it at that), the object of the show was to produce or reinforce heterosexual marriages; the use of queer handmaidens to produce straight marriages, however, is one of the things the show naturalized and trained us not to query. The middle of the novel is a time of generic jouissance (the pleasure of suspense and detection) as well as the pleasure of sex/gender/ability disorder, with Dexter at the heart of both threads. These narrative threads, however, are dynamic and purposeful no less than the degenerative disease, or disease of degeneration, that gradually burns out his volatile presence; all three move toward closure, unknotting at once. Dexter gives up his secrets; Eustace, who has had a serious illness, returns home with his wife; and the lawyer Playfair solves the mystery.21

The passion that Dexter articulates for Valeria, however, is the last trace of sexual energy in the book. In their final meeting, he involuntarily gives up, in a deranged speech, the piece that completes the puzzle of Sara Macallan’s death: Sara poisoned herself after Dexter gave her the diary in which Eustace wrote of his distaste for her. Valeria returns to a subdued marriage, changed not only by Eustace’s illness and the birth of a son but also by what she has learned in Dexter’s company of the dimensions of human pleasure and pain. Soon after, she learns that Dexter’s mental and physical dissolution have ended in his death. It is in this subdued and mournful mood that Collins leaves us, connected
through Valeria to Dexter as a fully evolved character whose failures to meet the impossible identities of able-heteronormalcy are never completely domesticated and smoothed over. Dexter’s irregularity persists as that which exposes the fissures and failures of the marriage plot, marking above all how much it depends on the very energy it needs to repudiate in the form of characters like him.

Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* offers a useful model of how to read this ending. Rather than the abject body that “fails to materialize” within the discourse of “sex,” forming the “necessary ‘outside’ . . . for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter,” Dexter intermittently and partially materializes that norm to the extent that we see both the limits of its constructedness and the losses it produces. And instead of simply producing “a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms,” Dexter argues for “a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life,’ lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving.”

It is tempting to end a reading of *The Law and the Lady* there, with grief. There is no resolution—inside or outside the novel—to the sense of loss Dexter’s death produces. Perhaps this is the point: his death, the marriage of Fitz-David, and the birth of Valeria’s son combine to produce the troubled affect and affective meaning that shape the novel’s end.

McRuer discusses films such as *As Good as It Gets* as examples of invoking “the crisis of authority that currently besets heterosexual and able-bodied norms” only in order to resolve it. This is always a charge that critics have leveled at the Victorian novel, and more particularly the sensation novel: its ultimate goal is to conserve and reiterate the status quo. In *The Law and the Lady*, it is true that order of a sort is restored with Valeria and her husband’s reunion and the birth of their son. That this resolution follows on the heels of the deaths of Miserrimus and Ariel and the marriage (and instant aging) of Major Fitz-David suggests that the excision of nonnormative bodies, practices, and pleasures from the plot is a precondition of its resolution. The elegiac affect hanging over this happy ending, however, tells us otherwise. Dever memorably characterizes Victorian “legal” marriage as “a sinkhole of deception, hostility, abuse and grubby materialism at worst, and at best a site of placid, jog-trot boredom.” As we close *The Law and the Lady*, the Macallan marriage is not either of these, but the base from which it moves forward is a refusal of awareness: the letter revealing how Eustace’s rejection of his first wife led to her suicide remains sealed,
so that only Valeria and the reader have access to the shame and pain or rejection experienced by Sara Macallan—and Miserrimus Dexter. At the same time, we remember the novel’s middle and its affirmation of *The Law and the Lady* as a key example of Collins’s “erotically pluralist novels.”

So while the ending repudiates queerness and disability, it does so in a way that shows both the compulsoriness of the rejection and the loss it entails. What enables both the loss and its meaning is Dexter’s imbrication within the web of human relationships, as part of that human circle rather than its “outside.” The novel itself demands that we make sense of Dexter on these terms.

### Critical Cul-de-Sacs

While there are relatively few essays devoted to *The Law and the Lady*, Dexter figures prominently in most of them. He is also noted in most book-length studies of Collins. Called an “effeminate dwarf” and “half-human monster,” he has often been read biographically, as a figure for the author; metaphorically, as a figure for the plain Victorian woman, or the female detective; or historically, as a referent for the Victorian popular and/or medical “curiosity” or for nineteenth-century theories of psychology, physiology, and hereditary degeneration. Despite their differences, most critics from 1951 to the present have made sense of Dexter in ways that reiterate his separation from the world.

Any reading of Dexter as metaphor is problematic from the start, given how thoroughly developed he is as a *character*, as opposed to a *figure*, especially in comparison to Eustace. More to the point, Dexter as a metaphor must be distanced from the human circle in order to shed light on characters like Valeria, who are only temporarily displaced from a normative community role and long to return to it (and whose longing to return is partly what makes them “normal”). His gender-scrambling appearance and behavior, for example, are for Mangum “simultaneously a reminder of and distraction from the failure of those crucial boundaries between male and female, masculine and feminine” that Valeria’s detective work enacts, a useful elucidation of Valeria’s situation but not of Dexter’s own engagement in the world of gendered energies.

The historicist readings that inform the work of Mangum, Taylor, Rosner, Denisoff, and others are provocative and important, but still troubling in their effects. Mangum’s thoughtful study of the novel’s
interweaving of cultural constructions of gender and disability features an important section on the ways in which the novel anatomizes the visual dynamics between the atypically embodied and “norms,” positioning *The Law and the Lady* as part of a larger history of medical, popular, and literary displays of anomalous bodies, including the work of Geoffroy-St. Hilaire and Gould and Pyle; Bartholomew Fair; Tod Browning’s film *Freaks*; and Katherine Dunn’s novel *Geek Love*. When her essay moves from the novel’s recurrent emphasis on curiosity to a reading of Dexter through the analogues of Victorian “curiosities” or working-class “freaks” such as Joseph Merrick or the American Hervey Leech, however, it limits itself in important ways. While Leech, like Dexter, was characterized by “perfect symmetry, strength, and beauty” above the waist and the capacity for “feats of leaping,” as Mangum herself notes, theatrical display is not Dexter’s context. If Collins did use Leech for a template, retaining aspects of Leech’s bodily configuration and exaggerating others (removing the limbs entirely), he also specifically moved Dexter away from these public arenas of singularity and into a domestic space—however queer that space might be—and a circle of human relations that includes, at least for a time, both “freaks” and “norms.” Dexter’s privacy and the class status associated with it are in fact marked by the text; his estate is a crumbling holdout against the Victorian suburbs Collins so detested; his habits of couture and cuisine are funded by (crumbling) hereditary privilege. While the coded visual distance—scopophilia, even—between the curious reader and Dexter is compelling to consider, the fact that the novel critiques this visual dynamic between disabled and nondisabled people makes it a vexed key to the historical meaning of Dexter.

Further, this visual dynamic, and the economic relations historically affiliated with it, do not hold up in the novel. Many of Dexter’s displays, like the courtroom entrance, are self-choreographed performances in which it is abundantly clear who decides when the coverlid will fall off. Rather than supplicate able-bodied characters’ pleasure and money, Dexter’s bodily shows produce discomfort in everyone but himself. Even if Collins’s own display of Dexter as curiosity—and of curiosity about Dexter—is behind the character’s self-exposures, these are significant gaps in socioeconomic context, public affect, and narrative power between the character and his proposed analogues.

A more precise way of discussing Dexter and his relationship to the web of human relationships is through the discourse of degeneration in which he and his developmentally disabled cousin “Ariel” are
variant expressions of the same hereditary taint. This is one of the points Jenny Bourne Taylor makes in her analysis of Dexter's links to Victorian theories of consciousness and psychology, which were often closely connected to hereditarian thought. Within that discourse, Dexter's advances toward Valeria are scandalous not just because she is married (and, we later learn, pregnant), but because the pre-eugenic discourse of degeneration argues that no one should have procreative sex with Dexter. Scientific interest, however, is not the primary energy the narrative invests in him. Mary Rosner's reading of Dexter variously as a “monster” or mutant, a man with an unhealthy body and mind, and a sideshow freak does not resolve the problem. Dennis Denisoff is more persuasive in his focused connection of Dexter with Max Nordau’s theories of the degenerate artist.

Yet another historicist tack that no scholar has explored might be to read Dexter as a representation of the double amputees that were not that unusual either in industrialized and post–Crimean War Britain or in our own age of war veterans. This “normalizing” reading, however, would require us to elide all the extravagance Collins insists on investing in Dexter, just as the other historicist readings require us to see him as detached from social life and domesticity.

None of these historical analogues is a very good fit with Dexter, and this is actually part of the novel's point. Locating Dexter within late-Victorian culture, Collins pointedly delineates the confusion and ambivalence in other characters’ responses to Dexter in a way that richly suggests his cultural constructedness. Is he a “crippled gentleman,” a “wretched crippled creature,” a “Thing” that curdles the looker's blood, a “deformed creature,” “a Portent,” “an Indian idol”? There is no clear consensus of how to talk about a man with Dexter's body, much less about the feelings he evokes. And, despite a series of rich and interesting analyses, critics have been similarly frustrated. We have not yet found a way to consider either Dexter's failres or subversions of convention in full context of the human community without in some way retooling the character to fit our critical purposes.

And yet, I would argue, this is exactly the work we still need to pursue, both as scholars and as citizens. If we have attached Dexter to particular cultural gaps, we have not considered those gaps as filled with energy that might be mobilized against the oppression of particular kinds of bodies and practices within Victorian culture or our own. Further, if as Mangum argues, “encounters with Victorian sensation writers’ obsessive attention to physical deformities embarrass, even shame twentieth-
century readers,” we have not done much in the way of exploring the
dynamics by which that shame is written on the bodies of characters
such as Dexter or transferred to our own readerly bodies. The critical
frameworks we have used to discuss Dexter have thus diminished the
power of Dexter’s critique of normative bodies and practices, useful both
in Collins’s time and in our own era of social inequities.

A substantial part of the pleasure of reading *The Law and the Lady*
originates in the dramatic, curious presence of Dexter, who catalyzes
the novel’s most memorably playful and bleak moments, but a produc-
tive critical analysis must avoid using the alterity of the past as a *cord-
don sanitaire* for that pleasure. Critics have become more suspic ious of
metaphoric, unhistoricized readings of literary representations of human
difference; but historicist readings have their own pleasures and dangers.
Locating Dexter in the Victorian freak show, for example, not only tin-
kers with the plot of Collins’s novel but also preserves our enjoyment of
this character in an imagined Victorian tableau in which our readerly
spectatorship has no relationship to our extrafictional practices of liv-
ing and looking. This approach may subtly reinforce disabled figures’
separation from actual human *communities*, keeping alive the concept
of “The Disabled” as an undifferentiated group of people distinguished
by their essential difference from nondisabled people. Alternately, his-
toricist readings that invoke an equality discourse (Dexter as normal
disabled person) run the risk of removing the pointed commentary on
social relationships that figures such as Dexter enact. There are no easy
formulas, then, for ethical readings of representations of human varia-
tion. As scholars of literature and culture, we need both to historicize
carefully and to ask what our work and its use of history make possible.
As the analysis of characters such as Dexter inevitably suggests the
place of disabled people in contemporary social relations, we need to
consider which historicist readings actually help return disabled figures
to the human community, and which ones reinscribe disability as radical
difference under the cover of history and its legitimating power.

**Conclusion**

We may have only recently found the critical tools—a combination of
queer theory and critical disability studies—that will let us make full
meaning of Miserrimus Dexter, reclaiming him as part of the human
circle. We can make more nuanced sense of that circle by including
Dexter in it. We may also be able to move, through Dexter, beyond the critical approach of identifying stereotypical ways of representing the sexuality of disabled people. If a critical commonplace has been that disabled men, for example, are culturally constructed as castrated, meaning either feminization or asexualization, queer theory allows us to consider the many representations that exceed that phallocentric framework—those in which disabled male characters are in fact highly sexualized, but in whom “sex” is complexly nuanced, not unitary or anchored to biological givens.

A critical disability and queer reading allows us to consider Dexter beyond the terms of metaphor or figuration and more in terms of a material representation of the relationships that exist and might exist among a range of embodiments and sexualities. To put it very simply, disability-centered and queer readings might open up the novel’s messages in wider ways and to a wider group of readers, including those for whom bodies and desires like Dexter’s are viable subject positions rather than curiosities. Such an opening of the text might also invite new ways to position the character and the novel in their Victorian cultural web, in which the conventions Collins flouted throughout his life may have been less consistently rigid than we have imagined.

Notes


2. Helena Michie points out that in nineteenth-century literature and life alike, “the most famous honeymoon stories are stories about failure,” from Frankenstein and Tess of the D’Urbervilles to John and Effie Ruskin. See *Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.


7. Ibid., 95, 96.

9. My reading of Dexter as “queer” should not be read as positioning him in a homo/heterosexual binary, but rather noting his power to confuse that binary. His object choices, which are consistently feminine, mark him as heterosexual; his performances of gender explicitly disrespect the binary; and the desires he articulates and mobilizes in others are disruptively unconventional. Here my exploration might be productively considered in conversation with Melissa Free’s essay in this volume. Free explores queerness as homosexuality and distinguishes it from the quality of “freakishness” that is valued in the novels she discusses. Regardless of Collins’s novel predating the use of the term “homosexual,” I argue that Dexter’s queerness cannot be accommodated by this term.

10. We learn later in the novel that the account we read of Dexter’s courtroom entrance is not an extract from the report but Valeria’s paraphrase, a fascinating narrative device.


12. Ibid., 294.

13. The portrait of Dexter combines a number of the visual rhetorics of disability that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson identifies in her important essay “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in Snyder et al., 56–75. The novel’s illustrations, as Mangum observes, provide a strange countereffect: instead of rendering Dexter’s manly and womanly appeal, they portray him as a “round-shouldered, sad-faced elderly gentleman in a wheelchair” (287–88).


18. Collins was privately and publicly infuriated by the editors’ censorship of this section of the novel. See Jenny Bourne Taylor, “Appendix” to *The Law and the Lady*, 415–18.


21. Eustace’s return is catalyzed only by his illness; Valeria continues her detective work in secret, against his wishes, through Playfair, until she can finally give her husband the means to declare his innocence. The ending leaves unopened the letter from Sara Macallan that tells of her suicide in response to Eustace’s unspoken rejection, thus clearing him legally while indicting him in other ways. This plot element echoes *The Moonstone’s* similar one of rejection and a hidden/buried letter that publicizes it.


26. Mangum, 295.


29. In this, Dexter is a precursor of the “nameless deformity” of Edward Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” published in 1896.

30. Part of this complexity is historical; some theorists argue for an un-self-conscious sexualization of disability before the Victorian era, followed by the rise of charity and the instantiation of a disabled master identity of charitable object that was, at least officially, incompatible with that of sexual object or sexual being (despite or because of the ease with which the two identities may be collapsed). Thanks to Leila Granahan for raising the question of disabled representations that do not fit critical commonplaces any more than they do popular-culture stereotypes.