Problem Novels

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If [after reading sensation novels] the reader is not prepared to be poisoned, stabbed, blown into the air; to find a skeleton in every cupboard, and a lost will in every drawer; to meet with an inconvenient number of husbands, and a most perplexing superfluity of wives; and to get rid of them by means of arson, strangulation, or a deep well, he must be very insensible indeed to the influence and charm of the situation.

Having prepared us by these well-known arts not to be surprised at anything, our sensational novelists then introduce us to domestic relations of an exceedingly peculiar character. The means are various, though only slightly various, but the end invariably one—to make the reader very tolerant of whatever strange thing may happen beneath the roof of the home to whose secrets he is introduced.

—Alfred Austin, “Our Novels: The Sensational School” (1870)

The reigning contextual mode of critical study of the Victorian period … relies on the fluid translation of a (social, economic, intellectual) environment into fictional discourse: typically, a more-or-less out of the way historical feature of the period is characterized through the selective use of primary and secondary materials, and its pertinence to the proper assessment of (usually canonical) texts asserted. To be sure, there may be side skirmishes with Michel Foucault or Nancy Armstrong in the introduction, but such theoretical anxieties pass, and the critic settles down to read a few canonical and perhaps a smaller number of uncanonical Victorian novels with a mind stocked more-or-less full of writing on, say, sanitation, correcting a few previous readings as he or she goes … That the limits of this mode of criticism, as commonly practiced, are familiar and much discussed makes their persistence all the more intriguing.

In his 2003 review essay, Andrew Miller registers dissatisfaction with the year’s research in the nineteenth century, which showed a preponderance of Foucault-inspired studies “confidently immured within an orthodox, loosely new-historical set of historiographical assumptions, devoted to understanding and judging individual texts by appeal to historical contexts sometimes richly—but often poorly—conceived” (960). Of this “reigning mode” he goes on to say, perhaps with more accuracy than charity: “At their least successful, such books display a kind of strangled ambition, narrowing their contextual field but making hyperbolic claims within that field” (967).

Nor, as Miller points out, is he the only critic to notice the limitations of this critical mode—they are “familiar and much discussed” (967). Indeed, James Eli Adams notes in his 2001 “Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century” essay: “Many recent accounts of Victorian domesticity have restaged versions of what one might call Foucauldian melodrama: the familiar story of the many-headed Hydra of ‘surveillance’ violating the sanctity of domestic privacy” (858–59). Similarly, Caroline Levine writes in The Serious Pleasures of Suspense (2003): “In the wake of Barthes, Belsey and [D. A.] Miller, it has become something of a commonplace to presume that suspense fiction reinforces stability, activating anxiety about the social world only in order to repress that anxiety in favor of unambiguous disclosures and soothing restorations” (2). And Caroline Reitz, whose own Detecting the Nation (2004) undertakes “to challenge the us-them model of panopticism” (xv), comments in a 2004 book review:

Simon Joyce’s Capital Offenses is one of a recent crop of very welcome books that takes another look at the question of crime and punishment in Victorian culture, a question that since the late 1980s has come to be dominated by Foucauldian readings of power … Joyce’s book joins works … which ask the reader to challenge the ‘containment thesis’ of a certain kind of Foucauldian reading of culture and to explore more complicated, less ‘unidirectional’ ideas about power. (100)

Reitz goes on to compare Simon Joyce’s work to Lauren Goodlad’s 2003 Victorian Literature and the Victorian State, which has received similar press. For example, Jennifer Ruth, citing Andrew Miller’s barbed remarks on post-Foucauldian Victorian studies, writes: “For many of its readers, the value of Lauren Goodlad’s new book . . . will
be determined by its success in offering a paradigm that can move us, as the title of its first chapter puts it, ‘Beyond the Panopticon’” (“Review” 121). Editors Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente describe their 2002 collection, *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle*, in similar language: “In key respects, the present volume looks to a post-Foucauldian dispensation, keeping its distance from approaches that too easily assimilate bodies of knowledge to techniques of management—whether of the social body, the intellectual field, or the individual person” (8).

According to this critical turn, the problem seems to be that Foucault-inspired studies, in the wake of foundational works like Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988), and Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* (1988), are guilty of erasing difference, reading all texts and contexts into a giant uniform power/knowledge edifice. In other words, the tools with which the master narratives of Enlightenment rationality and psychological “repression” were dismantled have instated a new master narrative—one in which surveillance, discursive knowledge, and discipline invariably produce “docile bodies.” If only we could “get past” Foucault—one pictures him occupying (or not?) that room in the tower of the Panopticon—we could reinvigorate a stagnant field of study. What is being offered in place of the “comfortable pessimism” (Anderson and Valente 9) of the containment thesis is the exhilaration of messiness, the promise of more than meets the eye, and more or less explicitly the promise of the return of liberal agency. As Jonah Siegel writes in a 2005 review of David Wayne Thomas’s *Cultivating the Victorians* (2004), Thomas “attempts to engage the frequently unspoken, but nevertheless influential notion that the cultivation of the individual is best understood as a mystified subjugation of the self quite contrary to the aspiration for individual agency with which it is often associated” (309).

But, I want to suggest, it is not that “we just can’t get past Foucault.” (Indeed, by giving Foucault credit for the nuances that literary criticism often erases from his theory, we can see that much of what he says about productive as opposed to repressive power still seems useful.) Rather, this Foucauldian paradigm invites scholars to reiterate over and over again, if not the same arguments then the same generic tropes—tropes that depend paradoxically on mutually exclusive notions of cultural power and critical agency. The notion that nothing is outside of discourse, that power invisibly and inexorably penetrates all aspects of modern life, has been explored and
elaborated by a generation of scholars whose invocation of Foucault seems to grant them a “get out of discourse free” card. In other words, studies that describe the intricate workings of power and cultural production on unconscious subjects in Victorian culture do so from a privileged position of critical empowerment and distance that the theoretical underpinnings of the projects would deny.

This critical paradigm operates not just on a hermeneutics of suspicion but, I would argue, on a “hermeneutics of sensation”—a mode of inquiry that depends on (1) the critic’s suspicion of a “secret” power at work invisibly in some historical context; (2) the ferreting-out of that secret through the critic’s detective work, sifting for textual clues; and (3) the revelation of the secret to a readership attuned to the sensational nuances of the genre. Therefore, the similarities between the two passages I quoted as epigraphs to this chapter—Alfred Austin’s satirical description of the sensation novel, any sensation novel, in Temple Bar, and Andrew Miller’s description of a kind of Victorian scholarship “function machine” (context X + novel Y = critical monograph Z)—arise out of more than an incidental confluence. In describing recent work in nineteenth-century studies, Miller is picking up on the dangers of the sensation genre: in seeking to produce sensations in an increasingly jaded reading public, authors resort to means “various, though only slightly various,” (Austin 414) to imagine permutations within the prescriptions of the genre.

I trace the generic tropes of current Victorian scholarship back to Victorian literary sensationalism for two reasons: First, like the sensation novel, Victorian cultural studies seeks to expose the hidden significance of the ordinary—to reveal, in Austin’s words, “domestic relations of an exceedingly peculiar character.” Second, both sensation novels and Victorian cultural studies—Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian alike—grapple with similarly complex and layered theories of subjectivity. Indeed, as I hope to show, some of the difficulties currently at play in literary scholarship “after Foucault”—in particular the problem of accounting for a subject other than as entirely culturally subjugated without merely returning to optimistic faith in the rational autonomous individual—are explored in the very fiction that was so useful for inaugurating the age of Foucault in the first place.

Like its Gothic predecessors, the sensation novel appeals affectively to its readers, offering opportunities for intense attachments and emotional and visceral responses. As Austin sarcastically points out, the sensation novel demands that its reader be “sensible” to its
influences. But, unlike the Gothic, the sensation novel’s “charm” resides in its exposure of the lurid secrets hidden in the mundane. In 1982 when Patrick Brantlinger wrote “What Is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel?’” he articulated the parameters of the genre thus:

The sensation novel was and is sensational partly because of content: it deals with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings … The best sensation novels are also, as Kathleen Tillotson points out, “novels with a secret,” or sometimes several secrets, in which new narrative strategies were developed to tantalise the reader by withholding information rather than divulging it. (30)

John Sutherland similarly identifies two features that characterized the advent of sensation fiction with the 1859 serialization of *The Woman in White*: the “detective feats” of its protagonists and its “high-impact narrative” ("Wilkie Collins” 75). To this I would add that sensation fiction also engages the reader in a fantasy of knowingness in which suspense and uncertainty anticipate the pleasures of revelation and explanation—murkiness precedes clarity; messiness invites resolution. Moreover, the reader’s pleasure in the “novel with a secret” (like *Lady Audley’s Secret* or *The Moonstone*, say) inheres in the paradoxical pleasure of being simultaneously “in” the mystery, invited to follow along and glean clues alongside the text’s detectives, and outside the text, knowing more than a character “embedded” in the narrative.

The discovery of Foucauldian criticism was the bad news that the reader’s comfortable yet exciting position of knowingness outside the text is really one embedded in a disciplinary network of which the text itself is a productive part. But this discovery has occasioned a whole new narrative with a secret, a story that critics of Victorian texts and readers offer to their readers—a new fantasy of knowingness, a new pleasure in suspense and revelation. Underpinning these new detective stories is the conviction that we are right to be suspicious, that power—coercive or productive—is ethically suspect and that “resistance” is to be fostered. It is not entirely my intention to argue otherwise, although recently critics like James Kincaid and Rey Chow have done so persuasively. But what I do want to suggest is that disciplinary power as a concept has become the means of imagining a cultural space exempt from disciplinary power as a mechanism. Of course, anyone who works at a university or other institution
will not, I imagine, try to argue that she or he operates in a “discipline-free zone,” nor even that her research and publishing are pure intellectual endeavor. But within the rhetorical and epistemological (which is to say, metaphorical) space of academic research, the critic emerges as a figure fantastically imbued with agency. In other words, in the “persistent” iterations of the story of disciplinary power in Victorian culture, critics are also telling the story of their own critical detachment and radical social potential.

Readers will no doubt begin to suspect that I am guilty of engaging in a detective story similar to the ones I reveal in other critics’ work. I certainly don’t want to disavow my own attachments to sensationalism, but rather to offer a kind of self-reflexive criticism that enjoys its guilt, as it were. Garrett Stewart argues in Dear Reader: “The novel always reads rather than merely transmits the prevailing discourses of its day” (276). Following this assertion, I take as a premise that, far from “the mid-Victorian novel flourish[ing] in innocence of theory” (Kendrick 1), novels both articulate and critique theories of culturally embedded subjectivity—in other words, they read themselves being read. And I want to present here literary criticism that reads itself reading the Victorians. It is thus my aim in Problem Novels to explore the idea that our critical projects have more in common with the “disciplined” (Victorian) reader of Victorian novels than we generally admit. I maintain that the Victorians were not so sensationally susceptible to discipline as they are often represented as being; nor are we so discipline-resistant as we might hope to be.

I consider works by Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope, and George Meredith, written within roughly a twenty-five-year span in the 1860s and 1880s. Although only Collins can be said to be a sensation novelist proper, all three novelists engaged very directly with the concept of sensationalism as a mode of appeal to their readership. In each case I argue that while the author posits a reader who is both culturally embedded and sensationaly susceptible, he also explores a methodology for critical engagement with cultural texts, thereby simultaneously theorizing a critically empowered subject. Hence, the title Problem Novels indicates my sense that these novels pose problems for their readers by inviting them to consider the process of their own subject formation. And, in turn, I consider how these moments of fictional self-consciousness might offer ways of imagining our own critical endeavors as both affectively invested and critically engaged. Before discussing the novels, however, it will be useful to consider the genre of sensational criticism, after which I will
turn to some recent efforts to think past the “disciplinary model” of subject formation and discuss how these might be useful for reading problem novels (and *Problem Novels*).

**OUR CRITICS: THE SENSATIONAL SCHOOL**

As a storyteller [the detective] defines his superiority, conquering the ostensible criminal by absorbing him and his deviant plot within his own controlling story, defeating his rivals by presenting a convincing narrative of explanation, and even, at times, disempowering his fellow characters and figurative readers by subjecting them to artfully contrived moments of shock and sensational revelation.


If the Victorian sensation novel is about the revelation of shocking secrets, the pursuit of guilty parties, and detection of hidden crimes, then the project of much Victorian cultural studies scholarship likewise has been concerned with outing “invisible” power relationships, finding disciplinary stratagems where there seem to have been only popular novels, or ladies’ magazines, or India shawls. Certainly this shape is very clear in work from the 1980s and ‘90s by Foucauldian scholars like D. A. Miller, Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, Ann Cvetkovich, and others, who addressed themselves to exploring the ramifications of productive power. As Miller writes, for example, in *The Novel and the Police*: “The turn in *The Moonstone* from a professional detective to lay detection acquires its widest resonance as a parable of the modern policing power that comes to rely less on spectacular displays of repressive force than on intangible networks of productive discipline” (51). Similarly, in *Mixed Feelings* (1992), Cvetkovich argues:

The image of the beautiful and transgressive [Lady Audley] becomes sensational when we know that she is evil and we both see and don’t see her criminality in her appearance … The meaning of the sensation or affect is thus constructed rather than natural, and the representation that produces it can signify both female transgression and its containment. (50)

In other words, Miller and Cvetkovich both argue that the exploration of crime within the novel stages the disciplining of subjects within Victorian culture. Robert Audley in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, for
instance, investigates the secret past of his uncle’s charming new wife and reveals, through the accrual of damning evidence, her lurid crimes and insanity, which, having been sensationally revealed, are then contained, literally in an asylum and figuratively within the resolution of the novel itself.

But here Miller and Cvetkovich write themselves into the role of the detective who has discovered a crime, in this case the invisible disciplinary power of the sensation novel itself. They too will track the novels’ secrets, revealing them to their readers clue by significant clue, offering a sensational payoff for those who follow their narratives to conclusion. In these narratives the threat of “productive discipline,” having been rendered tangible, will be neutralized. I want to be careful here not to imply that these studies or ones that follow them are necessarily wrong. I think that they offer valuable insights into Victorian texts and contexts. However, in mirroring the very narrative structures that they seek to reveal, they too participate in a kind of invisible disciplining, in this case of Victorian studies. And it is perhaps this “disciplining of the discipline” that accounts for the “persistence” that Andrew Miller notes; the discourse of Victorian studies does indeed, as discourses do, produce subjects in a particular mode.

As Miller observes, the sense in current criticism that it is time to move beyond the revelations of works like *The Novel and the Police* doesn’t necessarily lead to a different kind of criticism. I want to examine briefly two recent studies that I would call sensational criticism—Caroline Reitz’s *Detecting the Nation* (2004) and Simon Joyce’s *Capital Offenses* (2003)—and one study that gets accused of sensationalism, but for slightly different reasons, Caroline Levine’s *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense* (2003). Although the first two studies offer noteworthy complications of Foucauldian surveillance and engage very directly with the difficulties of doing Victorian studies post-Foucault, they nonetheless reproduce a kind of surveillance narrative within the structure of their arguments.

Both Reitz’s and Joyce’s studies are concerned with rereading the figure of the detective outside the model of panoptical power. For example, Reitz, who begins her study of Victorian detective fiction with a critique of Foucault’s Panopticon, writes:

In short, contrary to the logic of the Panopticon, the power of surveillance supplies a vital link between center and periphery as much as it reifies a difference between them. By tracking the power of
surveillance as it emerges in the form of the detective, I intend to challenge the “us-them” model of panopticicism presently associated with imperial authority, Victorian national identity, and the figure of the detective. (xxiv–xxv)

Reitz’s study complicates what she sees as the uniformity of Foucauldian accounts of surveillance, but the very language of her critical project inadvertently creates an “us-them” dichotomy between the Victorians, whose uses of the detective figure are available for observation and analysis, and herself, the critical scholar who “tracks” the power of surveillance in Victorian culture. Reitz, in taking “a closer look at panopticicism” to remedy the “too-tidy explanation of the rise of the detective” in post–The Novel and the Police scholarship (xx, xxii), performs a well-known trope of the detective novel, whereby the seemingly watertight explanation of the crime (often provided by the bumbling police or an enthusiastic sidekick) is revealed to be a red herring (by the more-clever detective), and the mystery must be addressed anew.

Joyce, whose work, you will recall, Reitz hails as a welcome corrective to Foucauldian scholarship, undertakes a similarly discursive reading of Victorian texts. He describes the objects of his study as follows:

London, then, is mapped: in a literal way by surveyors, architects, builders, cartographers; and in more figurative ways by novelists, journalists, sociologists, government investigators. I am primarily concerned here with that latter group of texts, as cultural artifacts that are both distinct from and also an extension of the former. (4)

For Joyce, “mapping” is the thing he is studying, but it also becomes the mode of his own analysis, which gathers together cultural artifacts in order to “draw distinctions,” to incorporate a “model of reception … [that] directs us back to practices of reading and the social formation and spaces within which it occurs.” Although Joyce’s study is ostensibly opposed to “geography as simply the holding in place of the reading subject, as it might be for a Foucauldian criticism,” he nevertheless uses Foucault (and Miller as his proxy) as the fixed points around and against which to draw his “reading formations” (5, 6; emphases mine). Further, if Joyce attributes to urban Victorians the “desire for mapping,” which, he argues, “would seem natural, given this terrifying displacement of self” and would “allow the
larger totality to appear knowable” (3), then surely his own project signifies a similar desire to chart hitherto unrevealed terrain in Victorian crime fiction for his readers. Indeed, in the final lines of *Capital Offenses* Joyce reminds his readers that he has “traced ... important shifts in the cultural representations of crime within a dramatically reconfigured political landscape” (233).

The metaphorical language of “tracking” and “mapping” to describe the critical project is by no means unique to Reitz and Joyce. Rather, it is ubiquitous in scholarly writing and signals what I would call “disavowed panoptic privilege.” Interestingly, both Reitz and Joyce make a double move: on the one hand, they imply that previous critics have fallen into a sensation trap by offering their readers lurid stories of hidden disciplinary power; on the other hand, they insist on the messiness and “murkiness” of Victorian culture. In other words, by setting their own work apart from previous accounts, which they allege have been too formulaic in their attachments to the “containment thesis,” these critics present a picture of Victorian culture newly reinvested with deviance, complexity, and mystery, and therefore inviting new investigation.

In this way, sensational scholarship posits a triple-layered readership: the susceptible, malleable Victorian reader who was “produced” through the discourses of his or her age; the sensational (and therefore imperfectly critical) Victorianist reader who apprehended some but not all of the mystery from the available clues; and the critically savvy “realist” reader of today who, with the benefit of hindsight, can see what was hidden from the Victorians themselves and from past generations of Victorianists. Thus, for example, Lauren Goodlad claims in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* to offer her readers the anachronistically privileged perspective to “view the New Poor Law from within the culture that produced it” (35). One can certainly see how this pattern replicates itself with each new study staking a claim based in some part on the insufficiency of previous work and thereby contracting with readers to provide ever newer and bigger revelations. But, in making this kind of gesture toward “truth,” critics belie their sensationalism, or rather, paradoxically, they exhibit “detective feats” and offer “high-impact narrative[s]” based on a newer, more-comprehensive, and more-accurate experience of Victorian literature and culture. As James Eli Adams maintains, the new Victorian studies “offer a more complex, more plausible, and ultimately far more engrossing account” than the familiar “Foucauldian melodrama” (859).
What is interesting about this commitment to faithful representation is that it adopts the same language that the Victorians themselves used to privilege realism over sensationalism. Compare, for example, an 1872 review of Anthony Trollope—in which the reviewer claims that the public, “who eagerly swallowed the sensation poison for a time ... [now] knows where to turn for the faithful portraiture of the present which alone it loves to study” (Hoey 400)—with Jonah Siegel’s review of David Wayne Thomas’s *Cultivating Victorians*, which, Siegel claims, “may be recommended as a soft-spoken yet effective corrective to influential ideas of liberal values that have been more often assumed than clearly established” (309). According to Siegel, Thomas’s “gentility of expression” and “commendable tact” are coupled with “extremely responsible and archivally informed case studies of Victorian culture” (310). By adopting this “realist vs. sensational” rhetoric, critics answer the crisis of faith that Andrew Miller articulates when he questions the “intriguing persistence” of Foucault. The answer is this: having learned to see through the sensational appeal of panoptical power, the critical world now knows where to turn for the “faithful portraiture” of realist criticism.

This privileging of realism is illustrated in Peter Garrett’s 2005 review of Caroline Levine’s *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*. If, for Siegel, David Wayne Thomas is the Trollope of Victorian studies, then Levine is Garrett’s Mary Braddon. Garrett makes the now-familiar gesture “beyond” Foucault. He begins by remarking that recent works in Victorian studies have “loosened the hold of notions like Barthes’s ‘classic realist text’ or Foucault’s panoptic discipline, enabling us to set aside condescending or suspicious assumptions that nineteenth-century realism was hopelessly naïve or enthralled to bourgeois ideology” (490). He argues, however, that while Levine “presents her study as a contribution to this reappraisal,” her “curious” version of realism ultimately undermines the validity of her argument. Garrett concludes, “If Levine had recognized the implausible results of her own critical experiment, and abandoned the effort to link realism with suspense, there would still remain much of interest ... But as an account of the relation between ‘Victorian realism and narrative doubt,’ her book is as implausible as the most sensational fiction” (490–91).

Garrett’s invocation of sensation fiction as an uncomplimentary comparison designates Levine’s book as sensational because it reveals realism’s “secret” attachment to suspense, a secret that he finds far-fetched. Garrett points to the implausibility of sensation
criticism much in the way that Wilkie Collins, perhaps disingenuously, rebuked sensation novelists for the “publication of books that pander to morbid delight in scenes of crime and guilt, which seem to have a special attraction to uneducated and debased minds” and which are “written to gratify a craving after excitement” (“Art of Novel Writing” 392). According to Collins, and Garrett seemingly, the sensational author resorts to far-fetched plot devices in order to pander to his or her audience. Although one would hesitate to suggest that Garrett accuses fellow scholars of possessing “uneducated and debased minds,” I don’t think we should overlook the sensational appeal of precisely the implausibility that he rebukes, even in the most “responsible and archivally informed” of scholarship.

Indeed, the merits of Levine’s book or the accuracy of Garrett’s description of it aside, the review itself would seem to occasion at least two widely divergent responses from readers unfamiliar with Levine’s work. On the one hand, one might say, “Thank goodness I have been warned away from the implausibilities that this study would inflict on me,” and look for a less sensational study of realism. But on the other hand, one might say, “‘Implausible as the most sensational fiction?’ You say that like it’s a bad thing!” and run over to the campus library first thing to investigate. I would suggest that despite current disavowals of sensationalism, the “implausible” argument is precisely what is prized in Victorian studies, and with good reason. After all, as every reader of sensation novels knows, the most obvious explanation is never the right answer. The pleasure of uncovering the hidden significance of a seemingly inconsequential clue is much the same, I would argue, whether one is reading about Walter Hartright discovering the importance of a railway timetable to Laura Fairlie’s “death,” or about Nancy Armstrong unearthing the pivotal role of conduct literature in the formation of bourgeois ideology, or about Caroline Reitz revealing the English detective at the outskirts of the Empire.

In fact, what I find most interesting about Levine’s work is that in linking the unlikely suspects of serious intellectual skepticism and narrative suspense, she shows how cultural studies scholarship has inherited the intertwined legacies of critical inquiry and narrative pleasure from a Victorian hermeneutics of suspicion, thereby highlighting her readers’ own critical investments even as she explores Victorian attachments to suspense. As she says: “Suspenseful narratives teach us to take pleasure in the very activity of stopping to
doubt our most entrenched beliefs, waiting for the world to reveal its surprises, its full unyielding otherness. The pleasures of suspense are, then, remarkably serious pleasures” (10). As an extension of this, I would suggest that the payoff for reading Victorian scholarship (for Victorianists) is not just the professional satisfaction of acquiring accurate and comprehensive knowledge; it is also the pleasures of narrative suspense and revelation, of participating in fantasies of critical agency. And if this is true, then the answer to the persistent problem of the “sensational Foucault” is not to embrace a “realist” mode of criticism as somehow truer and less problematic, or more “tasteful.” Rather, we should acknowledge (in order to explore) our attachments to the sensational genre. What are the stakes for the critic who appeals sensationally to his or her audience by offering the “implausible” argument? Or who writes, for example, for a series that offers its readers “brief manuscripts that make brash and revisionary claims”? Or for the critic who deprecates the sensational in criticism? The main question to ask may not be, how should we read the Victorians? but rather, what are we like when we read the Victorians?

EXPLORING AMBIGUALNT AGENCY

If recent critiques of Foucault’s disciplinary model have tended to reproduce some of the same sensational tropes that they uncover, some have also explored useful ways to reinvest the disciplined subject with agency. In her essay “The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: Feminist Histories and the Horizon of Modernity” (2000), Amanda Anderson considers problems that arise within Foucauldian scholarship. She argues provocatively that Foucauldian notions of cultural power have led to a kind of theoretical conundrum for studies like Nancy Armstrong’s Desire and Domestic Fiction and Mary Poovey’s Uneven Developments, wherein

agency is imagined as continuous with the unreflective forms of power that are simply transmitted by culturally embedded subjects. Yet on the other hand, strange exceptions occur, wherein certain historical subjects are exempted from the networks of power, and consequently granted what I will characterize as “aggrandized agency,” which is marked by both critical lucidity and political potency. (44)
Anderson points to particular figures, like the Brontës for Armstrong and Florence Nightingale for Poovey, who, unlike the run of feminine subjects who are unconscious of their participation in or subjection to cultural power, are granted a political savvy and insight into the workings of disciplinary power that matches that of the critic herself. As Anderson points out: “On one level these critics are skeptical that any such detachment is possible, yet on another level they rely on such detachment for the promulgation of their critical social theories” (52).

The difficulty, as Anderson identifies it, is one of theorizing cultural power and critical agency in a way that, on the one hand, takes into account the ubiquity (and complexity) of modern power and, on the other hand, allows for the possibility of culturally embedded subjects engaging with and critiquing forms of power in self-conscious ways. Anderson argues that we need to pay careful attention to the ways in which the Victorians (and we as their descendants) cultivate an ambivalent relationship to ideals of detachment. She concludes: “The cultivation of detachment—which in some sense is only another name for the examined life—is always an ongoing, partial project, whose interrelated ethical and epistemological dimensions promote the reflexive interrogation of norms and the possibility for individual and collective self-determination” (63).

This is the same issue that Judith Butler explores in *The Psychic Life of Power*, in which she contends:

A critical analysis of subjection involves: (1) an account of the way regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place; (2) recognition that the subject produced as continuous, visible and located is nevertheless haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation; (3) an account of the iterability of the subject that shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned … The analysis of subjection is always doubled, tracing the conditions of subject formation and tracing the turn against those conditions for the subject—and its perspective—to emerge. (29)

Butler uses the psychoanalytic concept of melancholia to imagine a culturally embedded subject that is, although brought into being by power, not fully accounted for by its subjection. She calls this the
“double-bind of agency”—a paradox whereby the subject, which is a product of power, resists the very thing to which it owes its existence.

Given Anderson’s ongoing critique of Butler’s version of the performative subject, my juxtaposition of the two may seem idiosyncratic. In particular, Anderson criticizes what she sees as Butler’s inability to account for intersubjective and collective agency. Yet I think the two offer similar, and similarly useful, articulations of subjectivity “in process.” Like Anderson’s description of the “ongoing, partial project” of critical detachment, Butler’s emphasis on this double-bind, or ambivalence, wherein the “subject is neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both)” (17), accounts for the notion of the subject as becoming rather than simply being. That is to say, rather than existing in any self-evident way (either as autonomous rational being, or as hapless subject to disciplinary power), one is always in the process of becoming, which, as Butler insists, allows for “the possibility of a re-embodying of the subjectivating norm that can redirect its normativity” (99). This makes novels, with their virtually endless iterability, their demands for affective investments, and their own deep investments in social systems, seem like particularly apt instances to examine the subject’s “reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject” (99). It is this notion of ambivalent agency that I attempt to keep at the forefront as I examine the novels in this study.

As I mentioned earlier, I find the novels of the mid-nineteenth century particularly concerned with theorizing “problematic” versions of subjectivity. This is not to say that one wouldn’t find a species of ambivalent agency in an eighteenth-century Gothic novel like *The Monk* or a modernist novel like *Orlando*. Indeed, my argument may be more generically than historically specific. Nevertheless, at the risk of slipping into the “reigning contextual mode of criticism,” I would suggest that the fierce debates in the 1850s through the 1880s surrounding the legislation of married women’s property forced a crisis in Victorians’ understanding of individual agency, and it is this crisis that plays out in the theoretical texts that I call “problem novels.” As Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon explains in 1854, the Victorian social and legal system treated single and married women very differently: “A single woman has the same rights to property, to protection from the law, and has to pay the same taxes to the State, as a man,” but in marriage
a man and wife are one person in the law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband. He is civilly responsible for her acts; she lives under his protection or cover, and her condition is called coverture ... A woman’s body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by a writ of habeas corpus. (3, 6)

Whereas a single woman could earn and keep money, enter into contracts, sue and be sued, once she chose to enter into a marriage contract she lost the ability to do all of these on her own behalf. Indeed, under coverture a woman could not be convicted of stealing from her husband, because it would be impossible to steal from oneself. In other words, a single woman who had “attained her majority,” who was in possession of her own wealth and person, could exercise her autonomy in order to enter into a marriage contract, under which contract she would forfeit the existence of that autonomous self. Woman, therefore, represented both a figure profoundly beholden to the forces of her subjection and an agent in excess of that subjection—a figure, in other words, ideally situated to embody subjectivity “in process.”

Given the Victorian woman’s ambivalent agency, then, it is not surprising that marriage in many a mid-Victorian novel would present a problem as much as a resolution. The novels that I discuss here engage with this dilemma of ambivalent agency on two levels. First, they explore the “contingent” nature of agency that can be both exercised within and erased by social interactions within their plots. In novels like Wilkie Collins’s No Name, Anthony Trollope’s Can You Forgive Her?, and George Meredith’s Diana of the Crossways, the active, willful heroines are a far cry from the victim-heroines of novels like Clarissa and The Monk, or even the “virtue rewarded” heroines of Pamela and Mansfield Park. Instead these novels feature heroines (and sometimes heroes) who make perverse choices, who commit themselves to dangerous courses or eschew happy endings, or who actively pursue or resist their own disciplining. And, second, for all of these novels, the consideration of readerly affect and subjection occurs at the interstices of genre, where novels play with their own conventions or invoke their own relationship to genre as a rhetorical gesture. Through generically self-conscious plots, the novels explore the reader’s vexed agency, asking what it means for a reader to choose to both accept and critique (critique while accepting) the discipline of the novel.
In chapter 1, “Sensation Fiction Theorizes Masochism,” I consider how mid-Victorian notions of the contract enabled novels to articulate ambivalent agency. I argue that the view of the contract, which Henry Sumner Maine asserted in his 1861 treatise *Ancient Law* was the foremost distinguishing feature of “civilized” society, allows widely disparate writers in the 1860s, Wilkie Collins and John Ruskin, to theorize the construction of a masochistic subject through affective investments in painful reading. In contractual exchange, the law of the family, inheritance, and the father’s legacy are supplanted by relationships forged between individuals and based on mutual obligation. Power and position are no longer only inherited, but can be mobile. Whereas Ruskin’s two lectures “Of Kings’ Treasuries” and “Of Queens’ Gardens,” which *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) comprises, call for readers to “annihilat[e] our own personality” (43) in order to become better selves, Collins’s two novels *No Name* (1862) and *Armadale* (1866) enact this dynamic both within the novels’ plots and as a narrative contract between novel and reader—that is, the act of reading is posited as an agreement to suffer. Thus the authors imagine the possibilities for an active, contracting subject, one who does not capitulate unquestioningly to institutional power so much as engage with it, even manipulate it for his or her desired results—a knowing, albeit disciplined, subject for whom the processes of subject production, regulation, and control are at all times visible, explicit, and, most importantly, imbued with a kind of painful pleasure. I argue that this preoccupation with the willingness of characters and readers to suffer suggests a way of rethinking the productive nature of the reader’s affective investments—it offers masochism as a position from which submission and self-consciousness are possible simultaneously.

If one of the promises of late-Victorian realism is to debunk the untruths and exaggerations of sensation fiction, then seemingly the adoption of economic language—the metaphor of the “marriage market,” for example—to describe sexual relationships is part of the process of demystification. This rhetorical conflation of economics and sexuality has led, in large part, to the current critical emphasis on the realist novel’s status as a commodity as well. However, as I argue in chapter 2, “Realism Theorizes Speculative Investments,” the adoption of economic language to describe sexual relationships shows that the Victorians themselves understood that both the economic system and the sexual system were dependent on emotionally laden choices, sensational payoffs, symbolic exchanges. This is the
problem for realist fiction: one of the “truths” about the way the system works is that in order for the system to work, the truth must be disavowed—sensational investments are in fact indispensable to the functioning of sexual exchanges, just as speculative investments are indispensable to the functioning of the financial system. The three Anthony Trollope novels discussed in this chapter—The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson (1862), Can You Forgive Her? (1864), and Miss Mackenzie (1865)—explore the novelist’s role as a producer of belief in the system of sexual exchange. Moreover, they highlight the contradictory obligations of the reader of realist fiction—simultaneously to invest and to resist investment in the romance.

In the late-Victorian imagination, rhetoric of aesthetic valuation became linked to social-evolutionary progress. For cultural and evolutionary theorists, refinement of public taste not only signified but also produced social progress, just as lack of refinement impeded it. Thus, in chapter 3, “The ‘New Fiction’ Theorizes Cultural Consumption,” I examine this intersection of aesthetic standards and social (d)evolution in two novels by George Meredith, The Egoist (1879) and Diana of the Crossways (1885), alongside his 1877 aesthetic manifesto, An Essay on Comedy; Matthew Arnold’s cultural criticism in Culture and Anarchy (1869) and “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864); and Francis Galton’s foundational eugenics treatise, Hereditary Genius (1869). Meredith, in both An Essay and his novels, imagines the woman reader as crucially linked to the evolution or degeneration of civilization, depending on the extent to which her cultural taste can be educated. He insists on “Comedy” as the antidote to sentimentality and sensationalism in literature and as the key to social progress. If Comedy is the critical lens through which to address society’s foibles, however, it is also a generic structure dependent on sentimental and romantic tropes. Coupling the self-consciously sensationalized romance with social critique grounded in theories of sexual selection and cultural evolution, The Egoist and Diana of the Crossways ridicule the sentimental reader’s affective attachments to the domestic comedy, yet also encourage complicity with the very sentimentalism they deride, thereby producing a layered analysis of the reader’s responsibility in civilization’s progress.

I argue that this stress on the responsibility of the “cultivated” reader still resonates in literary studies today as the critic’s fantasy of omnipotence—that is, that solely or primarily through the intellectual transmission from critical author (cultural authority) to student/reader may civilization evolve, paradigms shift, and oppressive
power structures be resisted. But Meredith’s understanding of Comedy also tells us to pay attention to how we have been “mixing our private interests” (An Essay 36) with the object of our observation, thereby offering us a way to own our sensational attachments even as we strive for the ideal of critical acuity.

And thus, “my present design being to rouse the reader’s interest” (Collins, No Name 6) in the following chapters—all of which consider the question of genre as they reflect on the limits of readerly investments—I invite my readers to consider their own investments (and my own investments) in this sensational genre too.