Introduction: 'Other Sensations'

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[I]f sensation fiction is cut out of the picture, we lose sight of a very substantial element of the field of fiction which is both original and transitional. [...] However, because the bulk of the critical attention is still directed at *The Woman in White*, *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, a shift in thinking is needed.¹

Written in 2005 – at which point research into sensation fiction was seen to have reached a 'crossroads' – the sentiments expressed by Andrew Maunder resonated widely with those working within the field. Thanks, in part, to the work of Maunder himself, we have made considerable progress in effecting this 'shift', not simply in our thinking, but also in the subject of thought. I have in mind here his six-volume collection, *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855–1890* (2004) which, together with the scholarly editions published by Broadview Press, Valancourt Books, and, most recently, Victorian Secrets, has served to broaden substantially the field of study and alert us to the breadth and diversity of the genre as a whole. For many of us, myself included, Maunder's collection represented the first opportunity to read the novels of such 'forgotten' sensationalists as Florence Marryat, Felicia Skene, Mary Cecil Hay, and Dora Russell. The fruit of such recovery work has been evident in a number of recent publications, such as Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina's *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* (2006), as well as a range of journal articles, most obviously those published by *Women's Writing*, that move us beyond sensationalism's most famous triptych of texts. Another significant moment within this process was the formation of the Victorian Popular Fiction Association (VPFA). Established in 2008 by Jane Jordon (Kingston University) and one of the contributors to this issue, Greta Depledge, the VPFA has already proved to be an invaluable forum for those interested in popular fiction, and the first two annual conferences, together with their study

days, have ushered a number of long-forgotten texts and writers back into the light of day.

‘Other Sensations’ – and I should explain that the ‘other’ of the title refers primarily to Wilkie Collins and Mary Braddon, who continue to receive the lion’s share of attention – was conceived in response to the developments described above. Based on the number of submissions I received (far more than it was possible to include), this ongoing expansion of the field shows no sign of abating. Such developments are not without their own challenges, but while the recovery of ‘new’ authors and texts creates the sense of a terrain that is shifting and unstable, it also ensures that issues relating to generic classification remain at the forefront of our thinking. The articles included in this issue usefully problematise the sensation genre in a number of ways: by suggesting new modes or means of producing and registering ‘sensation’; by challenging taxonomic boundaries (especially those between sensational and so-called ‘legitimate’ fiction); and by interrogating existing critical assumptions and constructions. Thus the ‘other’ of the title recognises not only that ‘sensation’ has been constructed as ‘an alterity against which opposed literary/cultural expectations may be recognized’,² but also that its significations are multiple rather than single and will continue to proliferate as long as we go on recovering forgotten texts and authors.

Eschewing the familiar, the following six articles explore a range of understudied works by Ellen Wood, Margaret Oliphant, Florence Marryat, Rhoda Broughton and Charles Reade. The inequitable weighting of female over male authors reflects the ongoing interest in women’s sensation fiction but it is worth noting that several of the pieces suggest that the critical preoccupation with female characters, especially the sensational anti-heroine, is beginning to give way to an exploration of sensationalism’s representations of masculinity. Taken as a whole, the issue also suggests that while current research on sensation fiction continues to bear the imprint of what Lyn Pykett has called ‘the conservative/radical dilemma’,³ we are much more aware of the ideological complexities and contradictions that characterise the genre.

Arranged chronologically, the first article is my own contribution, ‘A “base and spurious thing”: Reading and Deceptive Femininity in Ellen Wood’s *Parkwater* (1857)’. After a lengthy and too-exclusive focus on her most famous novel, *East Lynne* (1860), Wood’s wider corpus is now generating new levels of critical interest. That said,

she has not yet reached the heights of critical popularity achieved by Braddon, and a significant number of her novels remain understudied. In their introduction to the special issue of *Women's Writing* devoted to Wood, Emma Liggins and Andrew Maunder attribute such neglect to the author's apparent conservatism, suggesting that she is overlooked in favour of 'more obviously subversive and sophisticated contemporaries'.⁴ The construction of Wood as what we might call a quiet sensationalist has a long history. Writing of her 1866 novel, *St. Martin's Eve*, a critic for the *Saturday Review* complained that 'her sensational proclivities are not of that thoroughgoing kind which distinguishes some of her contemporaries. With every desire to satisfy the prevalent craving for the horrible and marvellous, she either cannot or will not go the pace of certain other popular writers'.⁵ Concentrating on her little-known *New Monthly Magazine* serial *Parkwater*, this article is, in part, an attempt to complicate this construction. As I argue, Wood's serial was self-consciously appealing to the *New Monthly's* male readers and thus she felt free to incorporate scenes and details of a surprisingly graphic nature. Situating the narrative in the context of a new commodity culture as well as the 1857 murder trial of Madeleine Smith, I suggest that Wood's exploration of deceptive femininity resonates with current events in a particularly insistent way.

In the second article, "'Vulgar Publicity" and Problems of Privacy in Margaret Oliphant's *Salem Chapel*', Tara MacDonald turns her attention to what is rightly identified as a 'benchmark text' in explorations of the contested borderland between sensationalism and domestic realism. The inherent hybridity of Oliphant's novel clearly troubled her contemporary critics and their desire to excise the more sensational aspects of the plot anticipates, somewhat ironically, Oliphant's later assertion – in a review of both sensational and realistic works – that 'we think it right to make as distinct a separation as the printer's skill can indicate between the lower and the higher ground in fiction'.⁶ It is now recognised that such attempts to demarcate strict boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' – 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' – forms of fiction were inextricably bound up with the material position of the professional critic at mid-century. Yet the resulting construction of literary 'value' has proved enduring and a number of twentieth-century readings of *Salem Chapel* continue to bear its imprint. But where these earlier critics could see only incongruity, more recent critics see the novel's hybridity as generative:

a site and source of new readings and meanings. Concentrating on a number of self-conscious moments within the novel – moments when the Dissenting minister, Arthur Vincent, and the young invalid, Adelaide Tufton, might be seen to stand in for the sensational author and reader – MacDonald explores how Oliphant attempts to alert her readers to the dangers of sensationalism, particularly its reliance on voyeuristic thrills, while she, herself, is engaged in producing it. Too often characterised as simply hostile to the genre, MacDonald's analysis of Oliphant's 'ambivalent sensationalism' offers a more nuanced understanding of her fraught and complex relationship with the genre.

In the introduction to his 2004 edition of Florence Marryat's *Love's Conflict* (1865), Maunder suggests that there has been 'much greater resistance to recovering her reputation than that of her contemporaries such as Mary Braddon, Mona Caird, or George Egerton, whose revivals are now well established'. As a result, he argues, this once popular novelist 'is now largely untaught, unread and out-of-print'.⁷ While the situation has improved in the past six years – with Marryat's spiritualism as well as her 1897 novel *The Blood of the Vampire* garnering the most attention – I was particularly pleased to receive a submission on Marryat's seventh novel, *Nelly Brooke* (1868). Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, Greta Depledge argues that the significance of this little-known tale of the intertwined lives of the eponymous heroine and her twin brother lies in the complex interstice between sensation, science, and medicine presented in its pages. At the heart of the narrative is an 'archetypal Victorian invalid', a hysteric confined to the sofa with spinal weakness. While such a figure is hardly unusual in nineteenth-century fiction, Marryat's novel interrogates contemporary gender and medical assumptions by gendering the invalid male rather than female. A contradictory amalgamation of patriarchal power and feminine disorder, the character of Bertie is read, by Depledge, as part and parcel of Marryat's engagement with contemporary understandings of hysteria – themselves inherently confused and contradictory – as well as a more generalised questioning of the complicated dynamics of doctor–patient relationships. As she ably demonstrates, such aspects of Marryat's work contribute to the literary and cultural interest of her writing and warrant further study.

In the first of two contributions on Rhoda Broughton, 'Rewriting *Corinne*: Sensation and the Tragedy of the Exceptional Woman in

Rhoda Broughton's *Good-bye, Sweetheart!*, Tamar Heller explores how Broughton's first signed novel deliberately reworks Germaine de Staël's 1807 novel in a self-conscious display of cultural capital designed not simply to enhance her own literary status but also to 'underscore her connection to a female literary tradition that critiques male representations of female experience'. At the heart of each of these novels, Heller argues, is an 'exceptional woman' and her struggle to reconcile romantic passion and desire with a love of independence and power. Yet by replacing the passionate Romantic artist Corinne with Lenore Herrick, an outspoken girl of the period and 'rebel without a cause', Broughton 'charts in the area of gender roles a trajectory not of progress but of decline'. Returning the reader to issues of generic boundaries and taxonomies, Heller argues that *Good-bye, Sweetheart!* 'does not abandon the sensation genre so much as employ a new strategy for portraying the controversial topic of bourgeois women's desire'. Reading Broughton's text through a variety of paradigms – the Victorian Woman Question, the position of the professional female artist, and what Athena Vrettos has called the 'somatic fiction' of female illness – Heller's insightful analysis sheds new light on a novel that has remained neglected for far too long.

As suggested in the opening sentence of the penultimate article, critics of sensation fiction have tended to concentrate on 'the spectacle of femininity and female suffering evident in many novels of the genre'. In contrast, Georgina O'Brien Hill's "'You ain't the man you was": Learning to be a Man Again in Charles Reade's *A Simpleton*', explores the intersection of masculinity and imperialism in this 1873 narrative of personal development and imperial adventure. Like Depledge, O'Brien Hill draws the reader's attention to the genre's hybridity by foregrounding the interaction of the novel's adventure and sensational plot devices, both of which, she argues, are employed 'to make a spectacle of masculinity'. An emasculated figure within what is identified as an 'increasingly feminised metropolis', Christopher Staines must travel to South Africa in order to reclaim a properly gendered identity through imperial dominance before he is able to assume his rightful place as the patriarch of English domesticity. While O'Brien Hill's postcolonial reading clearly demonstrates the extent to which Reade's novel anticipates the adventure fiction of the 1880s, it also sheds new light on his treatment of masculinity: unstable, fluid, and performative in nature.

Anna Despotopoulou's final, wide-ranging article, 'Trains of Thought: the Challenges of Mobility in the Work of Rhoda Broughton', reflects the growing critical interest in sensationalism's relationship to modernity. Focusing on the overlooked *Nancy* (1874) as well as her 1873 tale, 'Under the Cloak', Despotopoulou explores how Broughton incorporates the effects of the railway – that 'agent and icon of modernization'⁸ – not simply into her plots but, more significantly, into her style. Arguing that Broughton's female protagonists experience modernity – disjointed and inchoate – mainly through their senses, the author suggests that the railway is employed as a means of externalising a transitory and drifting consciousness. Thus the railway journey, 'with its technologically generated mobility, becomes the external manifestation of the spontaneous inner flow of desires and fears, which race with equal speed through the mind and body of the heroines'. The frank sensuality of such heroines led nineteenth-century critics to place Broughton within the ranks of sensationalism but her work, as Pamela Gilbert suggests, 'shows none of the other trademarks – secret marriages, changes of identity, or class slippage – that show up so abundantly in Wilkie Collins or Braddon'.⁹ Here, however, Despotopoulou argues that Broughton's novels contribute to the genre 'in a more provocative way, by focusing on the swift and unpredictable alternation of sensations in woman'.

Mark Knight recently suggested that the 'large number of sensation novels produced in the nineteenth century presents major methodological difficulties for those who want to make claims about the genre and its cultural significance'.¹⁰ This may be true: I, for one, occasionally find myself suspecting that, despite our growing body of knowledge relating to the genre, its 'significance' may still reside elsewhere, in some other, as-yet-unread 'sensation'. Reading the articles collected in this issue, however, it becomes clear that, despite any ensuing 'methodological difficulties', it is precisely through such forays into the lesser-known regions of the genre that we will ensure its ongoing popular and critical appeal. I would, finally, like to express my gratitude to all the contributors for making my role as editor so interesting and enjoyable. I have learned a great deal from reading their work. I hope the readers of the present issue will feel the same.

Notes

1. Andrew Maunder, 'Mapping the Victorian Sensation Novel', *Literature Compass* 2 (2005), 1–33 (26).
2. Richard Nemesvari, "'Judged by a Purely Literary Standard": Sensation Fiction, Horizons of Expectation, and the Generic Construction of Victorian Realism', in *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Columbus: The Ohio University Press, 2006), 15–28 (18).
3. Lyn Pykett, 'Afterword', in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. Marlene Tromp et al. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000), 277–80 (279).
4. Emma Liggins and Andrew Maunder, 'Introduction: Ellen Wood, Writer', *Women's Writing* 15:2 (August 2008), 149–56 (150).
5. Anon., 'St. Martin's Eve', *The Saturday Review* (31 March 1866), 387–88 (387).
6. [Margaret Oliphant], 'Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 102 (September 1867), 257–80 (275).
7. Andrew Maunder, Introduction, *Love's Conflict*. In Vol. II of Andrew Maunder (ed.), *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855–1890* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), vii–xxxviii (vii).
8. Nicolas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.
9. Pamela K. Gilbert, *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 89.
10. Mark Knight, 'Figuring Out the Fascination: Recent Trends in Criticism on Victorian Sensation and Crime Fiction', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37 (2009), 323–33 (325–26).