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Critical Transformations: Disability and the Body in Nineteenth-Century Britain

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<1>We are happy to present a special summer issue of *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*. As editors, we are likewise fortunate to present an issue richly diverse in thought and perspective. The work of popular writers is well represented in it, with analyses of fiction by Charlotte Yonge, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Marie Corelli, Lucas Malet (Mary St. Leger Kingsley), and Fitz-James O'Brien. Other essays introduce us to generative new perspectives we can bring to our research and teaching of canonic or near-canonic works like *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*. Nor is the issue limited to essays on fiction: M. Jeanne Peterson's analysis of medical reports about early puberty and Wendy Parkins's study of the discourse of Jane Morris's invalidism exemplify the cultural studies emphasis of the entire group of essays, all of which move us to grasp a wider set of cultural threads through their investigations of individual texts.

<2>We believe that this issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* represents a significant re-focusing of the paralleled theoretical work currently emerging in both disability studies and gender studies. Perhaps it will help the readers of the issue to define here how the base-notion of disability functions for many of the contributors to the volume. Arguably, the category of disability itself is now enmeshed within (and indeed pushing beyond) the wide dissemination of the dichotomy or modern framework of the normal and the abnormal. In theorizing this binary, the category of disability emerges as a term linked with the discourses of labor and industry, and in part as a critical awareness of the negative social processes of organizing physical difference through such terms and such kinds of dichotomous structures.

<3>In other words, like gender, disability is understood and defined within the dynamics of social construction and performance. Recent research has demonstrated that disability is a construct built out of a normed perception of physical difference or impairment (Corker 3-4; Davis, *Bending* 50-51). In turn, the interdisciplinary field of disability studies has engaged these moments of perception, reception, and construction by interpreting and theorizing the complicated dynamics involved in them. In doing so, the field has arguably disrupted these cultural processes so that they are suddenly explicit and open, all of their desires and discontents transparent and accessible to critique and a larger transformative re-positioning.

<4>It is within this set of critical discourses that the critics here explore, critique, and re-write the representation and function of “disability” in nineteenth-century Britain. And again, in this context, these essays reflect an emergence of a critical mass in a "new" nineteenth-century body studies—work that expands beyond its earlier interest in things like brain fever, mania and madness, and deathbeds, and looks more critically at the various, mutually inflecting discursive continua that produce the Victorian self.

<5>Significantly, then, the collection of essays not only documents the vigorous presence of disability studies in Victorian studies, but also reflects the development of disability studies from a “newly emergent” disciplinary mode in humanities scholarship to an energized and diverse set of critical approaches.

<6>For example, the issue demonstrates the development of disability studies beyond a focus on “iconic” disabilities like sensory and mobility impairments. As Tamara Wagner’s essay on Yonge’s *The Two Guardians* illustrates, disability studies scholarship has moved far from blindness as metaphor to focus on the relational dynamics around blindness in the community; and while the critical analysis of the discourse of freakery is well represented by several essays, O’Connell, Peterson, LaCom, and Huff build on the substantial theoretical base in the works of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and others to move to a new theoretical location, in the words of O’Connell, “exploring in detail the diverse and particular relationships that problematic or objectifying modes of representation foster between onlooker and spectacle.”

<7>Several essays engage relatively under-explored issues in disability studies that are particularly so in nineteenth-century studies. Allen Bauman’s analysis of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novel *Thou Art the Man,* for example, targets the cultural construction of epilepsy, a rich site for analysis given the nineteenth century’s evolving discourse of neurology. As Bauman illustrates, Braddon’s novel reveals the degree to which epilepsy catalyzed debates about criminality, masculinity, sexuality, and class. If the epileptic body was regularly used to produce, through opposition, the normal masculine body, Braddon dramatizes the fissures and ambiguities in that cultural work.

<8>Like Bauman, Talia Schaffer explores a boundary case in her study of Corelli’s *Wormwood*. Addiction has attracted numerous debates about the definition of disability and its location in the body/mind/emotions/behavior. Most powerfully, however, Schaffer looks at the novel and its use of absintheur culture in the context not of social realism/critique/moralizing, but rather, of aesthetics, implicitly evoking the concept of disability culture by reading Corelli’s use of absinthism as both illuminating the problem of Romanticism's afterlife in the late-Victorian era and as producing a distinctly modern aesthetic.

<9>Like these two essays, Joyce Huff’s interrogation of Fitz-James O’Brien’s “What Was It?” focuses on masculinity as a dynamic cultural construction. She argues that O’Brien’s tale works within a discursive nexus of the literary gothic, medicine, pseudo-science, and the freakshow with a primary goal of “consolidating the power of the ‘normal’ man” through the extraordinary body.”

<10>The fecundity of visual and structural disruptions of “normal” masculinity and femininity for narratives of pathology and normalcy is also amply demonstrated by M. Jeanne Peterson’s study of “precocious puberty” and Cindy LaCom's analysis of the "ideological aporia" produced by "hairy women" like Marian Halcombe. Their essays work on the continuum on which the normal and the extraordinary both reside, noting the various points (and convergences) of discomfort, apprehension, attraction, and wonder these “extraordinary cases” produce, as well as their imbrication not only in discourses of gender and sexuality, but inevitably those of medicine, class, race, and empire as well.

<11>In a similar approach, Wendy Parkins engages the discourses on invalidism in her essay on Jane Morris, again critiquing masculine medical discourses and disrupting the parameters of the normal female body. Parkins claims in her work: “the fixity of 'the image of the invalid lying permanently on the sofa' does not so much perpetuate the “mystery” of the Pre-Raphaelite muse and model as render her all too decipherable through the trope of an invalidism assumed to be convenient or strategic.”

<12>Cognitive and neurological differences have not enjoyed the same level of scholarly study as those more discretely classed “physical.” Julia Miele Rodas’s startling and provocative reading of Jane Eyre as on the autism spectrum contributes to recent work in disability studies on neurodiversity, while at the same time drawing on disability culture to reopen discussion of canonic texts whose most interesting problems, like that of Jane’s disquieting affect, have yet to be exhausted, and whose political energies can be directed towards mostly un-realized forms of social justice.

<13>Mia Chen and Tamara Wagner’s analyses of the fiction of Charlotte Yonge also exemplify new areas of discussion in disability studies in their focus on disability as a relational entity central to the reproduction of other social identities. Both essays illustrate how Yonge enacts and advocates disability as a family and community relationship. Chen’s study of *The Daisy Chain* points out the essential role of disability in reproducing social relationships, particularly the range of relationships among women as well as their heterosexual byproducts. Wagner’s analysis of Yonge’s *The Two Guardians,* which she contextualizes in both Yonge’s other narratives of disability and the novelist’s rocky critical history, similarly looks at Yonge’s domestication of religion—and religion of domesticity—as a complex construction of the “dependable” as well as the “dependency” that is still a stereotype of disabled social identities.

<14>Desire and sexuality may have become near-clichés of Victorian studies in the late twentieth century, which seemed to favor jouissance and transgression above all things, but (over time) situated both in a relatively limited set of cultural locations. The multifaceted issue of disability and sexuality—seen as a productive, multi-directional energy rather than a problem or deficit (as in a rehabilitation perspective)—has been one of the most interesting and important new sites of exploration in disability studies. While sexuality is a discussion point in virtually all of these essays, Rachel O’Connell’s study in particular provides a fascinating new investigation of the nature of the non-disabled gaze of desire for the difference that is disability, exploring the soft border between “cripsploitation” and desire and the mixed effects (and affects) of Lucas Malet’s novel *Sir Richard Calmady.*

<15>We are honored to bring together essays with so much to contribute to our scholarship and teaching on the body in nineteenth-century culture. This exciting new scholarship stands to energize a continued dynamic of new and different questions for nineteenth-century body studies: new questions of canonic texts; good questions about underexplored non-canonic texts; and better questions about how culture builds bodies, and how we might read those constructions in provocative and powerful ways.

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