NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 21.1 (Summer 2025)

Lost & Found: Rediscovering the Victorian Female Detective

***The Mysterious Case of the Victorian Female Detective*.Sara Lodge. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2024. 384 pages.**

Reviewed by Katherine J. Chen, Brown University

<1>To say "detective" instantly conjures in the mind's eye the image of the pipe-smoking lone wolf wearing a deerstalker and flattering cape. That or perhaps a mustachioed gentleman with an egg-shaped head. Or even a mild-mannered, unassuming elderly spinster, who entertains at all times a preternatural interest in the goings-on of her environs. It's the equivalent of the "white bear problem." Think "detective," and any number of canonical figures will slip into the limelight from the shadows. Sherlock Holmes. Hercule Poirot. Miss Marple.

<2>But what of "Clubnose"? What of Ellen Lyon? Sisters Isabella and Jean Stewart? Or "detective female searcher" Ruth Morrell? These are only a few of the names given fresh, pulse-beating life in Sara Lodge's riveting page-turner, *The Mysterious Case of the Victorian Female Detective*, which investigates the historical and largely forgotten ([to say nothing of undervalued]) role female detectives played. To investigate, after all, is also to reveal. If the common course of mysteries, as we are familiar with them, culminate in a reckoning—say, a climactic confrontation with the villain or the gathering of suspects in the proverbial drawing room for an unmasking—Lodge does no less in her own version of real-life and equally important detective work as a scholar. What she uncovers, however, is not the identity of a sole perpetrator but the names and lives of women who lived in a world both temporally distant and intensely familiar to our own. Transporting her modern audience to the hurly burly of Hoxton's Britannia theatre, where one could purchase a gallery ticket for threepence and a quartern loaf or beef sandwich, and watch the "quick-change versatility" (99) of beloved actress, Sara Lane, who played Florence Langton, "the Female Detective," Lodge delineates the storylines of popular

theatrical performances and of serialized fiction and mass-market literature to demonstrate the unattainable ideal that the pioneering Female Detective embodied in the hearts of her ardent readers. Arguably most central to her work, Lodge exposes home truths ([indeed, the title of her second chapter]) as relevant today as they were nearly two centuries ago. These takeaways are what stay with the reader, and what make Lodge's work so resonant and powerful—even in their own way, revolutionary.

<3>Lodge rejects the popular ideal of a detective as a cerebral machine, an intellectual hobbyist-sleuth, whose powers can extend like an invisible force field from the comfort of a cushioned armchair. She writes, "My book boldly accepts the Victorians' own use of the term 'female detective', which was broad" (7). This point is central to understanding the role of the historical female detective, which was often far less glamorous in its grim actualities. Real-life female detectives were women like Jemima Davis, mother of four and the wife of a fishmonger and greengrocer, who relentlessly pursues a customer and engages in a violent, physical struggle ([which lands her through a shop window]) after he gives her a counterfeit two-shilling coin. Within the police community, female detectives were housekeepers and searchers, often the wives and family members of policemen, who had to exercise a mixture of detective cunning, calm, and courage when faced with a suspect in the station. Situations, as Lodge demonstrates, often escalated, with one searcher, Theodosia Curtis, stating that she had been struck three times—and had the black eyes to show for the attack. It is telling, and a significant contrast to the romanticized image of the gentleman detective, that the searchers, who provided such an indispensable service to these police stations, originated "[m]ostly from the working class…often came from rural backgrounds and were 'first-generation' city dwellers" (15). Lodge emphasizes that "[t]hey had to be tough, as violence was a continual possibility in their job, and their work had a strong physical element, putting their bodies on the line" (15).

<4>To extract a pawn ticket from within a woman's chignon or to unearth a piece of jewelry secreted beneath a tongue was only one part of a female detective's sometimes wide-ranging roles. She could be a watcher, such as in the case of Elizabeth Joyes and Sarah Dunaway, both married to policemen, who caught their ([criminal]) men, assisted by the camouflage of their sex. Ann Lovsey and Fanny Hodson, though of different backgrounds ([the former working-class, the latter middle-class]), are fine examples of detectives, who were able to expose illegal dealings by gaining access to places where, as Lodge points out, "[a] male policeman would have stood out painfully" (39). In Lovsey's case, this was a fortune-teller's

home, and in Hodson's, "the premises of midwife and suspected baby farmer Mrs. Castle" (46).

<5>Lodge's work deftly blends and, in so doing, analyzes the notable difference between the gun-wielding, cocksure female detective of the stage and the female detective, like Emily Oxley, who earned her living by accruing evidence in divorce cases where spouses hired private inquiry agencies to investigate and prove adultery. Lodge writes, "There is a fascinating tension between the ideal of the female detective as a highly educated, middle-class trailblazer…and the reality of casual or semi-casual agency work.…The real Victorian female detective pursued information that was often unwelcome, under conditions that were often unpleasant…" (165). Yet, as Lodge shows, the relationship between fiction, particularly in the theatre where actresses could with relative ease take on private inquiry jobs ([like Kate Easton and Dorothy Tempest]), and reality was frequently porous. This is evident in newspapers that advertised the services of private inquiry agencies boasting staff of male and female detectives, featured hard-news headlines of female detectives nabbing their culprit, and serialized fiction, often based on real-life accounts that had circulated in court news, valorizing female detectives. Fiction, in particular, seemed to afford the space to explore issues of social justice and what crime means for women. As Lodge astutely notes, "The purpose of the fictional female detective is typically not merely to solve a mystery and obtain justice for the victim ([though she does perform this task]). Her wider remit is to investigate the unseen sufferings of her sex, to resist and, on occasion, to revenge them" (67-68). Especially powerful are the examples Lodge provides of fictional stories that, even now, come across as incredibly forward-looking, such as Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's science fiction novel, *New Amazonia* (1889), and Florence Marryat's monologue, "What Shall We Do With Our Men?" (1893).

<6>If Lodge's book occasionally reads like a compendium of summaries of various media detailing the exploits and adventures of female detectives real and fictive, it's hard to imagine that many, if anyone, will mind. It's rare that a scholarly work is written with such panache, such joy, that almost every line thrums with the energy of the very detectives determined to tie up the loose ends of a case. The pages vibrate not only with a sense of adventure but also as a winking, fluorescent light that one might stumble upon in the dark, signaling the way to overlooked dime novels, short stories, and plays waiting to be read, to be studied, and to share the spotlight, if only for a time, with their better-known counterparts. The same vigorous blood that rendered Frances Power Cobb's call in 1888 for women to be admitted to the police force so dynamic and compelling, clearly infuses the veins of Lodge's work as well. Here are no rose-colored glasses. Issues like domestic violence, of emotional and

physical abuse, of adultery, of navigating female sexual desire, of losing one's identity after marriage, of abandonment and single motherhood, of living in fear for one's life outside of and within the home that so often fails to protect all of its inhabitants—these are perennial concerns striking in their modern-day resonance.

<7>In this, it seems the female detective, whether fictive or historical, will continue to reflect the complexity of the lives that must navigate these challenges in the daily struggle to survive and, if possible, to flourish. What Lodge ultimately offers in *The Mysterious Case of the Victorian Female Detective* is an unstinting portrait of a range ofsurvivors "extraordinary, but not inevitably heroic" (316), who utilized their various gifts, including but not limited to detection, to pursue lives of purpose, potentially even of independence. The key, it would seem, is to know, to make the always difficult choice to opt for the truth. Fiction can be escapist, yet it also lifts the curtain to show us what is possible; it is a shortcut to knowledge before we have necessarily attained it. But even an unsavory case can do the same in revealing the true face of a society that only superficially props up its manifold conventions and niceties. The author, with her usual flair, writes with tenderness and poignancy this telling line: "The female detective embodies both our intense desire to know the truth and how hard it is to prefer truth to our dreams" (12).