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052102207X - Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels

Pamela K. Gilbert

Frontmatter

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Popular fiction in mid-Victorian Britain was regarded as both feminine and diseased. Critical articles of the time on fiction and on the body and disease offer convincing evidence that reading was metaphorically allied with eating, contagion, and sex. Anxious critics traced the infection of the imperial, healthy body of masculine elite culture by “diseased” popular fiction, especially novels by women.

This book discusses works by three novelists – M. E. Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, and “Ouida” – within this historical context. In each case, the comparison of an early, “sensation” novel against a later work shows how generic categorization worked in the context of social concerns to contain anxiety and limit interpretive possibilities. Within the texts themselves, references to contemporary critical and medical literatures resist or exploit mid-Victorian concepts of health, nationality, class, and the body.

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POPULAR NOVELS

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly syntheses and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as “background,” feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field.

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