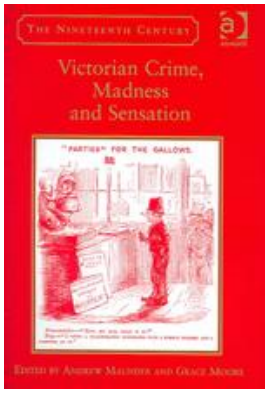

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 2.1 (SPRING 2006)

Identifying Criminals, Criminalizing Identity

Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation. Ed. Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004. 259 pp.

Reviewed by Audra Rouse, University of Texas at Austin

<1>The contributors to *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation* follow current trends in Victorian studies by looking beyond the drawing room and delving into the seedier aspects of Victorian culture. Editors Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore have compiled fifteen essays that explore a diverse array of sensational topics, ranging from regicide to cannibalism to masturbation. Spanning the entirety of Victoria's reign, the collection endeavors to "chart the development of crime writing as a genre and the growing dialogue between fact and fiction" (1). The essays, which are arranged chronologically, represent a wide array of genres, including penny bloods, periodicals, and of course, the sensation novel. The collection succeeds in placing these literary and journalistic narratives of crime into rich cultural contexts and offers a notable contribution to the growing body of work on the dark underside of Victorian life and literature.

<2>Although the interconnectedness of discourses of crime, insanity, and sensationalism is the titular theme of the collection, its topics could also be classified under several other headings: for example, urban life, journalism, reading practices, colonialism, science, and technology. Identity formations such as gender, sexuality, race, and class are also central concerns. Several essays, such as those by Grace Moore, Christopher E. Forth, and Máire ní Fhlathúin, demonstrate, for instance, how the emergence of the criminal as a distinct personality type during this period was largely contingent on the enforcement of other categories of identity. By defining deviant genders or sexualities as "crimes" or categorizing criminals as racially "other," sensational narratives often served as disciplinary tools that reinforced conventional codes of behavior.

<3>The categorization of acts as criminal, mad, and sensational could also serve to mask political dissent, as John Plunkett shows in his opening essay on regicide and reginamania in G.W.M. Reynolds's weekly serial *Mysteries of London* (1844-1856). Plunkett describes the "individual and collective madness" produced by Queen Victoria's accession, particularly in the popular fiction and nonfiction that proliferated in the early years of her reign. He shows how portrayals of such "madness" obscured anti-monarchical discontent and dramatized contradictions in the early-Victorian era's fetishization of the Queen's domestic life. Plunkett does not directly address the role that young Victoria's gender played in this public obsession with her private life, but one can hardly imagine the same kind of romantically tinged adoration being directed toward a male monarch.

<4>Many of the essays in the collection, however, do provide gender- and sexuality-based analysis. Andrew Maunder's chapter on *East Lynne* (1861), for example, reads Ellen Wood's popular sensation novel against the discourse of degeneration that was sparked by evolutionary theory of the 1850s. Countering feminist interpretations of Isabel Vane as a subversive heroine,

Maunder argues that she embodies widespread fears about moral and physical decay. The narrator clearly condemns Lady Isabel, and Wood invites the reader to conspire in this point of view and participate in the surveillance and policing of female sexuality. For Maunder, far from being a feminist writer, Wood is a "guardian of bourgeois propriety" (69). June Sturrock's chapter on Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Margaret Oliphant, and Charlotte Yonge also describes how mid-Victorian novelists reflect the culture's fears about women. Examining Oliphant's *Salem Chapel* (1863), Yonge's *The Trial* (1863), and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861) in the context of the Constance Kent murder trial, Sturrock argues that all three novels negotiate related anxieties about gender and privacy by evoking real-life female criminals only to back away from representing such women on trial.

<5>Barbara Onslow shows how female criminality and the periodical press could be used to

further women's rights. Her essay provides an interesting history of the nineteenth-century female prison reform debate and examines how female journalists used the issue to forward a broad feminist agenda. These activist women, Onslow argues, effectively linked the treatment of female convicts with questions of women's employment and, in doing so, contributed significantly to the women's rights movement. Christopher E. Forth shifts the volume's focus from women authors to the role of gender stereotypes in *fin-de-siècle* French representations of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish officer who was notoriously found guilty of selling military secrets to the Germans. Forth reads the sensational ways in which the case was represented as a crisis of masculinity that "allowed the pro-Dreyfus camp to depict their opponents as sick and effeminate" (165).

<6>Other chapters that address gender and sexuality include Leslie Ann Minot's work on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in relation to late-Victorian concerns about violence against children, and Grace Moore's convincing reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) as a masturbation story. Using the anti-masturbation tracts that warned young readers of the dangers of "self-pollution," Moore demonstrates how the novel reflects the increased policing of the body during the Victorian period.

<7>Some of the strongest pieces in the collection link the discourses of crime, madness, and sensation to representations of the racial or ethnic "other." Two of these essays deal with Indian crime narratives. Gita Panjabi Trelease traces many developments in criminology to India, making a particularly interesting argument about the ways in which new forensic technologies that originated in India helped to establish criminality as a "matter of individual identity" during the period (197). Máire ní Fhlathúin examines the *thuggee*, or Indian murderer, whom he describes as the "ultimate alien figure." Both exotic and domestic, the *thuggee*, Fhlathúin argues, also represents trends in Victorian crime, including the ways in which nineteenth-century discourses on crime often classified the "criminal as 'other' in terms of race, class or gender."

<8>Maria K. Bachman, writing on Wilkie Collins's *Blind Love* (1890), points out that the "sliding boundary between sanity and insanity" was critical in "reinforcing not only hierarchies of gender . . . but also hierarchies of nation and race." Bachman examines the treatment of the Irish in the novel, arguing that the use of stereotypes of the Irish as innately criminal and insane makes a case for English colonial rule. Similarly, in his consideration of the criminal career of "demon barber" George Chapman, Nicholas Freeman questions the public's harsh judgment of Chapman and concludes that his embodiment of so many turn-of-the-century social fears made him the perfect incarnation of the "other" and therefore the perfect scapegoat for various popular anxieties. Such anxieties were also reflected in the popular tale of Sweeny Todd, examined by Sally Powell. According to her materialist analysis, cannibalistic narratives like Sweeny Todd suggest a perception among the working classes that its members were literally and figuratively being consumed by industrialization. Powell's disgusting yet fascinating description of the unsanitary conditions that caused urban dwellers to ingest bodily matter on a regular basis makes a strong case for reading cannibalistic horror tales as stories of worker exploitation.

<9>Other essays in the collection include Dallas Liddle's insightful discussion of the coverage of the 1868 disappearance of Benjamin Speke, which identifies important differences between the practices of sensation novelists and sensational journalists. Dafydd Moore's essay on *The City of Dreadful Night* (1880) examines James Thomson's poetry of urban despair, and finally, Karen Odden turns to white-collar crime in order to explore its effects in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875).

<10>As such diverse essays suggest, the editors of this volume chose to define the key terms of "crime," "madness," and "sensation" quite broadly and, in doing so, may have cast their net a little too widely, resulting in the inclusion of essays that, though individually worthy, do not quite fit with others in the volume. The connections between essays might be clearer if the book had been arranged thematically; chronological ordering does not provide sufficient coherence or direction for so various a collection. Yet, this problem with organization is also reflected in the introduction, which is arranged non-chronologically. Although the introduction indicates that the book will trace the "development" of crime writing, it does not actually posit a clear progression from the beginning of Victoria's reign to the end, but instead groups the essays loosely by theme. Still, these shortcomings do not detract significantly from the value of the work. The cultural studies approach that is consistently found through most of the collection results in many fresh and insightful readings of Victorian texts.