

Jennifer Phegley, John Cyril Barton and Kristin N. Huston, eds

TRANSATLANTIC SENSATIONS

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*Reviewed by Lyn Pykett*

In 2006 Ashgate announced a new series in Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Studies. This new interdisciplinary field investigates the patterns and processes of mutual influence, exchange, interaction, and negotiation among writers and artists and between cultures on both sides of the Atlantic, and it also studies the material conditions which shaped these exchanges. Focusing on a nineteenth century long enough to stretch from around 1750 to 1900, the series launched with the well-received *The Atlantic Enlightenment* (2008), ed. Susan Manning and Francis Cogliano, which included essays by scholars working in literature, in intellectual, cultural, and social history, in geography and in political science. *Transatlantic Sensations*, the latest addition to the series, is broader in its chronological scope (c.1791 -1901), but its topic and disciplinary range are apparently confined to just one kind of literature. According to the editors, however, the transatlantic perspective opens up the subject to interdisciplinary investigation and expands its scope. While critics on both sides of the Atlantic, they say, have been keenly examining both the British and American sensation literature of the nineteenth century, scholars have not yet thoroughly investigated "the transatlantic intersections, commerce and exchange" between them (14). To fill this gap, the fourteen essays gathered here collectively examine the transnational publication system that shaped the development of

sensation literature -- especially the sensation novel. In doing so, the contributors map what the editors call "a new transatlantic lineage for sensationalism" in literature (16).

Adopted both within individual essays and in the collection as a whole, the transatlantic perspective shows how British and European sensationalism developed a reciprocal relation with its American counterpart: a relation that -- as others have argued about more canonical literature -- disrupts the traditional notion that cultural influence flowed only from the old world to the new. This perspective also reveals the longevity and multifaceted nature of the sensational tradition on both sides of the Atlantic, a tradition succinctly surveyed in David Reynolds's Preface. The book thus confirms the trend evident in recent studies of British sensation writing, which have stretched the sensation "moment" beyond the confines of the 1860s. In particular, by locating sensation literature in its transatlantic context, this volume stresses the importance of its pre-1860s incarnations: the Gothic novel, the urban Gothic, the Newgate tale, the city-mysteries novel, and crime fiction.

Though chronologically organized, this book also has a strong thematic drive. Its first three essays-- on the "pre-histories" of sensation --explore the transatlantic dialogue and debate generated by the publication of the Gothic fiction of William Godwin and Charles Brockden Brown, the sentimental fiction of Susanna Rowson, and Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Nearly half the essays shine a transatlantic light on sensationalism's usual suspects: George Lippard, George Thompson, Charles Reade, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Louisa May Alcott. A trio of essays find transatlantic sensationalism exemplified by--or somehow informing--the realistic and

domestic fiction of George Eliot, Charlotte Yonge and Thomas Hardy. The concluding essay, which examines early twentieth-century British and American reporting on the kidnapping of an American missionary in the Balkans, is somewhat anomalous. Though it exemplifies the aim of the series, which is to stretch national borders and generic boundaries, it is the only essay that treats journalism rather than what is usually called literature.

The transatlantic perspective is especially interesting when contributors explore race, slavery, and the conditions of the literary marketplace -- particularly the popular press and periodicals and the practice and culture of literary piracy. For example, Kimberley S. Manganelli persuasively argues that some British sensation fiction can be traced to American abolitionist texts such as Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" (1842), Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853). Irrupting into these sentimental abolitionist narratives, Manganelli contends, the realities of slavery took the shape of mysterious identities, sexual transgressions, madness and violence that were then further developed in Captain Mayne Reid's novel *The Quadroon* (1856) and Dion Boucicault's play *The Octoroon* (1859) as well as Braddon's *The Octoroon* (1861). In a particularly telling analysis, Manganelli shows how British writers transformed the sentimental figure of the Tragic Mulatta into the embodiment of dangerous secrets who is placed at the heart of a narrative of detection and discovery.

Jennifer Phegley links slavery to copyright law. Noting that slavery was commonly used as a trope in the campaign for an international copyright law, she probes

the pairing of slavery and transatlantic exchange in Braddon's *The Octoroon*. Like Cora Leslie, the respectable, English-educated octoroon who is exposed as a slave when she returns to her father's Louisiana estate, British texts--Phegley argues-- were enslaved as they crossed the Atlantic, and Cora's dual identity is said to mirror Braddon's situation: though she was a highly publicised and successful writer of sensation fiction for the middle-class magazines, her hack writings for the penny press were published anonymously in Britain but marketed under her name in America by the publishers of pirated versions. Kate Mattacks likewise shows how sensationalism was transatlantically marketed and disseminated by the publishers of sensation dramas -- especially those based on novels. Julia McCord Chavez highlights the transatlantic publishing context of Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. Examining its 1878 serialization in both the English magazine *Belgravia* (a champion of sensation fiction during Mary Elizabeth Braddon's editorship in the late 1860s), and the American *Harper's New Monthly*, Chavez argues that Hardy should be considered a cosmopolitan writer of sensation fiction rather than an insular realist.

Magazine publication likewise prompts Susan David Bernstein to reassess the intertextual transatlantic relationships between two other writers better known for their domestic realism than for their sensationalism: George Eliot and Louisa May Alcott. In sensational magazine stories that were pseudonymously published in the 1860s, Alcott rewrote Eliot's "The Lifted Veil" (published anonymously in *Blackwood's* and *The Living Age* in 1859). Besides showing how the two writers use sensationalism and the veil of anonymity to explore the problems and possibilities of gendered knowledge, Bernstein

explains how sensationalism was shaped by different print cultures on each side of the Atlantic.

In impact, British sensationalism bested its American counterpart. Though several contributors to this collection strive to argue otherwise, Bernstein shows that American-authored sensation texts were far less widely circulated in Britain than British authored texts were in America, and that British-authored texts bore greater cultural weight. *Oliver Twist* is a good example. Though published and reviewed alongside the work of American sensation authors, Dickens's novel escaped the sensation label. It did so, David Bordelon argues, because it yoked together contradictory strains of American culture. While feeding the American "hunger for titillating scenes of crime and violence" (60), it also gratified the American desire for uplifting stories and for a literary future in which, as an 1842 editorial in the New York monthly *Arcturus* put it, "readers will no more devour, with ghoulish appetite the blood and murder of Jack Sheppard, than they will eat raw pork steaks with treacle" (qtd. 60). In its American circulation and reception *Oliver Twist* maintained a delicate balance between the "sensational and the sacred" (73): a balance that reflected and upheld Dickens' high cultural status as a British import.

Other essays link Atlantic crossings of various kinds to anxieties about Empire and the global circulation of goods and people. Holly Blackford examines Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth*, which uses an Atlantic voyage as a plot device. First published almost unnoticed in England as *Charlotte: A Tale of Truth* (1791), it became a bestseller in America when published here under its new title in 1794. Blackford argues that Rowson deploys sensational elements for pedagogical ends.

Adapting British traditions to a new American form, her novel embodies fears about the failure of post- independence Americans to live up to the ideal of self-governance. Sensationalism and politics likewise converge in the fiction of Charlotte Yonge. Though Yonge was didactic and generally antipathetic to sensation fiction, Tamara S. Wagner shows how she experimented with sensationalism in the failed settler narratives of *The Trial* (1864). In Wagner's detailed reading, Yonge's novel exemplifies "the Victorians' imagining of the United States as a lost colony and a rising commercial power" (223-4), and her sensationalization of transatlantic emigration, Wagner argues, can best be understood as a "counterpoise to her anti-sensational, domesticating treatment of . . . potentially exotic spaces . . . at the Antipodes, that are nonetheless culturally closer to home" (224). Juxtaposing Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) with Alcott's *Behind a Mask* (1866), Narin Hassan examines threats to the home culture and the culture of home in an essay drawing on recent studies of consumer culture and the world of goods. The gendered representation of exotic goods in these novels, Hassan suggests, accentuates their sensational elements and reveals their shared investment in representing the figure of the dangerous domestic woman as both dependent upon and engaging with the global circulation of exotic goods from the colonies. Together, she argues, these two books reveal how the sensation novel travelled and circulated on both sides of the Atlantic, and in both contexts served to suggest a link between domestic life and a global culture and economy.

Sensationalism emerged as American publishers challenged the power of their British counterparts. As Amanda Claybaugh has argued in *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (2007), the absence of an

international copyright law (until 1891) made London the center of production for the nineteenth-century Anglo-American literary marketplace, but the publishing power of London was increasingly rivalled by that of Boston and New York. The essays in this volume collectively demonstrate how, from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, "sensation" in literature became a transatlantic phenomenon, with writers on each side of the Atlantic shamelessly borrowing from each other and with each side blaming the other for sensationalism's worst excesses.

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