
**Reviewed by** Alexandra Valint (University of Southern Mississippi)

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In *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction*, Kylee-Anne Hingston analyzes how disability relates to the form of Victorian literature. Rather than concentrating on historicizing Victorian literary representations of disability, Hingston pursues a “formalist approach to disability” (p. 18). Focalization is the formal method she returns to most frequently—in every chapter—though some chapters also consider genre conventions, open versus closed endings, and single-focus versus multiple-focus narratives. Throughout the book, Hingston is attuned to how the texts’ form and content create “surprising collisions” and “moments of irresolvable conflict” with regard to disability (p. 18). Hingston reveals how texts often erect a binary between disability and able-bodiedness while simultaneously troubling that same binary. While the texts frequently resort to representing disability as deviant, pitiable, or a spectacle, the texts also resist or complicate such stereotypical characterizations—particularly when the narratives are focalized through disabled characters.

As a narrative theorist myself, I would have appreciated a more developed account of and nuanced approach to focalization, the book’s principal formal concept. Gérard Genette articulated the vital distinction between who speaks (the narrator) and who perceives (the focalizer) and created a typology of focalization; since then, narratologists have debated and revised focalization’s terms, definitions, and applications. But Hingston only provides a short overview of focalization in the introduction and mostly relies on two terms: “external focalization,” which she defines as “narrative focused through a perspective outside the narrative action,” and “internal focalization,” in which the narrative is focalized through a character (p. 22). These two terms serve the project well, but I think getting into the deeper waters of narratology (such as James Phelan’s concept of dual focalization or Genette’s concept of zero focalization) would have benefited the textual analysis and would have allowed Hingston to contribute meaningfully to the theorization of focalization—particularly regarding its relationship to embodi-
ment and corporeal perception. Additionally, Hingston strains to fit her various narratological interests—including the figure of the narrator, narrator voice, retrospective narration, and occasionally the reader—under the narrow umbrella of focalization.

The book's first two chapters rely on the contrast and shifts between external focalization and internal focalization. Hingston oddly decides to devote chapter 1 to a non-British text—Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831; 1833 English translation). While the narrator's use of external focalization “portray[s] the disabled body as inherently deviant and different,” rare moments of focalization through the disabled character Quasimodo encourage the reader to empathize with him (p. 22). Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), the topic of chapter 2, alternates between a third-person narrator and the first-person narration of Esther Summerson. The third-person narrator externally focalizes on disabled characters like Guster and Smallweed and uses their disability for satirical, social, or metaphorical ends. Esther is sickened and scarred in the middle of *Bleak House*, and Hingston asserts that, because there is no evidence that Esther's scars disappear, she is a disabled narrator. Hingston pushes back against critics who assume Esther has been cured and states that “the novel suggests that Esther's scarred face is beautiful” (p. 60). While I find this statement powerful, I still interpret *Bleak House*'s conclusion as ambiguous on the status of Esther's scars; I also wished for analysis of how Esther describes ill and disabled characters—other than herself—in her narration.

Chapters 3 and 6 focus on the interpretation and misinterpretation of bodies. Chapter 3 covers two sensation novels—Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1863) and Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868)—to reveal how the genre “uses the disabled body to explore cultural anxiety surrounding the body's connection to identity” (p. 81). Heidi Logan's monograph *Sensational Deviance* (2019) similarly pairs Braddon and Collins because “the works of these two writers feature the genre's most complex engagement with disability.”[1] Hingston indicates that in *Aurora Floyd*, some readings of bodies—based on physiognomy or phrenology—prove incorrect; on the other hand, the novel's villains (James Conyers and Hargraves) are disabled, “stereotypically aligning deviant behaviour with deviant bodies” (p. 85). Contrastingly, the bodies of the heroine and her husband are healthy. Fascinatingly, Talbot Bulstrode, Aurora's onetime fiancé, was disabled in the serialized version, but Braddon removed his disability for later editions. Hingston also shows how characters in *The Moonstone* interpret disabled characters like Rosanna and Ezra, sometimes correctly and sometimes incorrectly.

Chapter 6 moves from the sensational fiction of mid-century to the mysteries of the fin de siècle. Late in the century, Hingston claims, disabled people were increasingly viewed as specimens to be analyzed by medical and scientific professionals. In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Hingston reads Hyde as disabled and productively focuses on other characters' consistent repulsion toward him; in their attempts to describe him, they implicitly diagnose him, casting him as abnormal and themselves as normal witnesses. And yet, of course, Hyde exists within Jekyll—deviance resides within normality. In Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock story “The Adventure of the Crooked Man” (1893), disabled Henry Wood is assumed to be the villain, but he really is the victim of the non-disabled Colonel Barclay. This detective story stages the “repeated undermining of attempts to interpret the deviant body” (p. 187). In both mysteries, normality can both deceive and contain criminality.

Texts’ ultimate marginalization of disability is the undercurrent that runs through chapters 4 and 5. I particularly enjoyed chapter 4, on the relationship between spirituality and disability in Ellice Hopkins's *Rose Turquand* (1876) and Charlotte
Yonge’s *The Pillars of the House* (1873). As the titular Rose grows up from a “sickly sinner to a healthy saint,” she discovers her Christian purpose in nursing her disabled cousin Charley (p. 112). Hingston persuasively argues that while Charley’s suffering makes him Christ-like, he ultimately serves Rose’s development: “Rose’s spiritual self-identity [is] contingent on the disabled body” (p. 115). Yonge’s *Pillars of the House* privileges interdependency for support and spirituality. Talia Schaffer similarly identifies Yonge’s novels as “both thematically and formally structured by communities of care.”[2] But Hingston demarcates the limits of Yonge’s communal vision by observing that while the narrator focalizes through many characters, they never do so through Theodore Underwood, who is cognitively disabled. The marginalization of disability seen with Charley and Theodore even results when the protagonist of the text is disabled, as is the case in Dinah Mulock Craik’s *The Little Lame Prince* (1875). In this fairy tale, discussed in chapter 5, the disabled Prince Dolor grows up to be king, but he never marries and eventually gives up the throne to his able-bodied cousin. I am not quite convinced by Hingston’s proposition that the narrator’s brief acknowledgements of the limits of themself and readers substantially complicate the story’s normative resolution.

*Articulating Bodies* makes for a good companion to Clare Walker Gore’s *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*—both books came out in the same year. While Hingston examines “narrative form and the human body” (p. 194), Gore explores “the narrative work performed by disabled characters in the Victorian novel,” particularly the “plot roles” and “plot-lines” (such as the marriage plot) they are placed in and excluded from.[3] Hingston’s attention to Dolor’s “magical prosthetic gifts” reminded me of Ryan Sweet’s *Prosthetic Body Parts in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (2022), which considers how Victorian characters use prostheses—from artificial body limbs to dentures and wigs—to achieve bodily “wholeness” (p. 142). As Hingston writes, “Victorians were grappling with what bodies meant,” and her book illuminates the many ways—though content and form—bodies articulated meaning in Victorian fiction (p. 95).

Notes


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