Pregnancy in the Victorian Novel is an innovative literary study that not only offers the first full-length monograph on the subject but also poses an intervention in the field of Victorian studies by proposing a methodology based on “somatic reading.” Building on ideas of “critical modesty” and “critical fabulation” from Pardis Dabashi (2020) and Saidiya Hartman (2008), Livia Arndal Woods defines “somatic reading” as “an analytical attitude attuned to the impressions of the body on the page and in our own messy lived experience” (p. 1).[1] This speculative and anecdotal approach to literary analysis provides a dynamic alternative to trends toward positivist or documentary historicism. The introduction to the book underscores how reading somatically highlights the continued relevance of historical texts to contemporary raced, gendered, and classed discussions about reproductive rights, drawing on the “personal is political” mantra of second-wave feminism to foreground the personal in the analytical readings of texts and recover subjectivity as a scholarly mode.

Chapters are organized thematically, following a chronological development of trends in the narrative treatment of pregnancy in Victorian novels. Beginning with moral judgment, working through the trajectory from sympathy to pathology, and concluding with impression, the chapters unpack the shifting cultural anxieties about women’s reproductive bodies as the moral and medical perspectives of mid-Victorian scientific hegemony give way to the destabilizing social changes and, consequently, more experimental narratives of the fin de siècle. The shifts in control over women’s bodies, against a background of medical specialization, are illuminated through Foucauldian and Freudian constructions of body and mind: the Foucauldian clinical and panoptic gaze focuses Victorian notions of bodily discipline and punitive judgment, while the Freudian underpinnings of what Arndal Woods terms “paternal
impression” emphasizes how cultural anxieties about sexuality and futurity project meaning onto reproductive bodies.

Chapter 1, “Judgment,” moves through case studies of pregnancies in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1848), Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864), and Charlotte Mary Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) to examine how the reader is encouraged to participate in the narrator’s moralizing gaze. Arndal Woods argues that leaving space for uncertainty, as opposed to the polarizing perspective of either ignorance or clinical certainty, enables readers to trouble conventional moral judgments which enforce the patriarchal values that are especially apparent in the narrators’ endorsements of the authoritative perspectives of the husband characters in *Can You Forgive Her?* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*.

Chapter 2 moves on to sympathy as a narrative mode, using the fallen women in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853) and George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859) as examples of how pregnancy aligns with depictions of female suffering to encourage sympathetic inclusion, in the case of Ruth’s illness and rehabilitation, or exclusion, in the case of Hetty Sorrel’s infanticide and legal sentencing. This chapter interrogates the motives of critical reading, suggesting that somatic reading and the foregrounding of “weak” knowledge is necessary to deconstruct “gendered, raced, and classed patterns of narrative logic that fetishize our texts” (pp. 49-50). This emphasis on alternative ways of knowing, which bell hooks has suggested, in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), forge a space for “alternative cultural production” and “a counter-hegemonic worldview,” provides a more inclusive model of critical reading and offers opportunities for making relevant contemporary connections.

This discussion leads into an interlude on sensation, which differentiates itself from the more textually focused and historicized analyses of the other chapters by making connections between the popular Sensation novels of the 1860s, in which depictions of racial diversity are largely absent despite the Atlantic slave trade being implicitly present throughout the era of empire, and contemporary constructions of Black motherhood in America. Relying on what she calls “gestural leaps” and “weak connections” to draw a line between Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) and tabloid stories about the miscarriages and stillbirths of celebrities like Chrissy Teigan and Meghan Markle, Arndal Woods makes the point that “the afterlives of Victorian maternal moralization intersect with the afterlives of slavery in twentieth- and twenty-first-century narratives about policies affecting Black mothers and families” (pp. 76-77).

Chapter 3, “Diagnosis,” examines the intersection between the representations of pregnancy and miscarriage or stillbirth in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871) and the period’s increasing professionalization of medical knowledge. Along with chapter 4, “Impression,” this chapter employs somatic readings to push beyond metaphorical readings of pregnant bodies, drawing on the notion from disability studies, as developed in David T. Michell and Sharon L. Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000), that disability is too often treated as a metaphor or plot device rather than embodied experience. Chapter 4’s discussion of Rosamond’s pregnancy as a metaphor for her doctor-husband’s “professional misdevelopment” is a lesson in the misinterpretations that arise from reading bodies—and texts—only as surfaces (p. 121).

Chapter 4 shifts toward psychology to highlight the disconnect between medical minds and maternal subjectivities in Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Lucas Malet’s *The History of Sir Richard Caimady* (1901), and Victoria Cross’s *Anna Lombard* (1901). Substituting the eighteenth-century theory of maternal impression for paternal
impression, Arndal Woods shows how patriarchal psycho-sexual anxieties are mapped onto generative and, potentially, degenerative bodies. The chapter highlights the “presentist stakes” of Anna Lombard’s unwanted pregnancy and murder of her biracial child, pointing to the colonialist legacies that underpin not only the curtailment of women’s reproductive rights but also “the death and murder of people of color” as a “solution” to racial tensions (pp. 126-27).

An excellent addition to the libraries of literary scholars specializing in the Victorian novel, the book also will appeal to interdisciplinary scholars with interests in fields beyond nineteenth-century studies, including medical humanities and the history of medicine, critical race theory, and feminist and women’s and gender studies. The embodied approach makes the text particularly accessible to a nonspecialist audience by questioning traditional constructions of authority and proposing a more inclusive model of expertise located in the somatic and experiential. The interlude, “Sensation,” with its examination of how moralizing judgments of women’s bodies in Victorian texts infuse contemporary political discourse about race and reproductive rights, is a particularly effective example of how humanities scholarship can be mobilized to generate greater social impact, as is the brief conclusion on the renewed relevance of these moral and punitive judgements regarding pregnancy in light of the US Supreme Court’s recent repeal of Roe v. Wade.

Note


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech

URL: [https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60103](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60103)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.