Saverio Tomaiuolo. In Lady, Audley's, Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Genres

Citation metadata

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Date: Fall 2012
From: Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature (Issue 122)
Publisher: Western Kentucky University Research Foundation
Document Type: Article
Length: 1,448 words

Main content

Article Preview :

By now, scholars of the sensation novel are quite familiar with just about every facet of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret. Yet Tomaiuolo casts a new light on the novel by contextualizing it within the genres which Braddon's amalgamates in this novel and further develops in her other works. Indeed the greatest strength of Tomaiulo's work lies in the contextualization of Braddon's novels within primary historical and socio-political texts. The book is divided into three parts: Part I "Gothic Mutations" explores the influence on and subversion of the Gothic mode in Braddon's fiction; Part II "Darwinian Detections" discusses Darwinian theory in Braddon's detective novels; and Part III "Victorian Realism" interprets Braddon's realistic fiction within the context of British and French realism.

Part I opens with Lady Audley's Secret. Though the novel is replete with Gothic elements, it violates the structural and thematic devices of the Gothic by simultaneously domesticating it and complicating it. By replacing the male villain of the Gothic novel with the beautiful and delicate Helen Talboys/Lucy Graham, "both pursuer and pursued, persecutor and victim" and with the frail aristocrat Sir Michael Audley as well as the ineffectual barrister, reader of French novels, Robert Audley, Braddon undermines the Gothic mode. Tomaiulo points to the "architectural irregularity" of Audley Court and "the presence of secret chambers," a Victorian country home which shares the features of medieval castles and becomes a new site of "transgression and penetration of the female other": "The isotopic reference to the serenity and peacefulness of Audley Court as former convent is an ironically proleptic narrative strategy which anticipates Lady Audley's criminal intents and, later, her incarceration in the Belgian asylum of Villebrumeuse" (26-27). In this chapter, Tomaiulo discusses the Madhouse Act (1828), the Lunatics Act of 1845 and John Conolly's medical innovations discussed in The Construction and Government of Lunatic Asylums (1847) which advocated the "performance of simple ordinary duties" rather than the physical restraint of mentally deranged people, especially of...

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