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*The Ambivalent Detective in Victorian Sensation Novels:
Dickens, Braddon, and Collins* by Sarah Yoon (review)

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The subsequent chapter traces the recurring presence of Switzerland in Dickens's fiction and correspondence from the late 1850s onward, including an intriguing literary connection to the country through his relationship with Ellen Ternan. It also explores the influence of two notorious Swiss expatriates on British popular culture and on Dickens himself: Mrs. Manning and François Courvoisier, whose public executions attracted large crowds—among them, Dickens. Mrs. Manning is thought to have inspired the character of Hortense in *Bleak House*, while Courvoisier prompted the novelist's 1846 letter to the *Daily News*, in which he criticized the disreputable behavior of the spectators at the hanging. Notably, Gmür presents a compelling argument that Dickens's description of his Swiss chalet—a Christmas gift in 1865—closely mirrors that of Villa Rosemont, where he stayed in Lausanne. Another intriguing Swiss connection lies in the echoes of the Alpine pass and the Great St. Bernard Monastery in Dickens's portrayal of the Night-Inspector and Jenny Wren's "mountains in the sky" in *Our Mutual Friend* (qtd. 167). Although it is documented that Dickens visited Switzerland four times—in 1844, 1845, 1846, and 1853—Gmür convincingly argues that he either returned later or considered doing so, as suggested by his letters from the 1850s and 1860s.

Gmür's analysis is both thorough and persuasive, enriched with engaging details such as Dickens's St. Bernard dog—a gift from Albert Smith following his travels in the Alps (20)—and his frequent visits to the Asile des Aveugles, the Asylum for the Blind in Lausanne (177). The book invites further scholarly exploration of Dickens's involvement with Switzerland, offering numerous encyclopedic insights that merit deeper investigation. An inquisitive reader might find the book lacking only in visual or illustrative materials, which would undoubtedly enhance the reading experience and spark greater interest.

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Sarah Yoon. *The Ambivalent Detective in Victorian Sensation Novels: Dickens, Braddon, and Collins.* Routledge, 2024. Pp. 162. £135. ISBN 978-1-032-43963-1 (hb).

Sarah Yoon's study is predominantly concerned with perceptions of the detective in the English novel of the mid-nineteenth century, when the sensation novel was at its peak of cultural popularity. Yoon surveys a selection of the work of well-known authors including Charles Dickens, Mary Braddon, and Wilkie Collins, but also extends the scope of her analysis to encompass lesser-known authors, with the aim of supplementing

the “historical understanding of the detective’s moral slipperiness and contingency through a reading of sensation novels” (3). The central argument of her study is that Victorian readerships felt an ambivalence towards the detective as both a real figure and as a literary construct, and that “in these mid-nineteenth-century formulations and literary projections of the detective” the figure was “viewed with both suspicion and tolerance, with revulsion and admiration” (1).

Yoon begins by setting out the historical contexts that informed the evolution of the figure of the detective in Victorian fiction. She rightly puts particular focus on the social and legal reforms taking place at the time, including the effects of the 1829 police reforms, and the cultural impact of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. Additionally, she incorporates a brief consideration of the “Indian mutiny” of 1857, as well as reflections on English perceptions of Europeans in the mid-nineteenth century.

This overview is somewhat flawed, particularly in Yoon’s understanding of the impact of the Matrimonial Causes Act, which she examines in connection with what she describes as “the Victorian gender ideology” and the “moral need” to protect it (26–27). Yoon asserts, for example, that the Matrimonial Causes Act “allowed women to divorce for the first time” (15), ignoring the four female applicants who achieved a divorce prior to the 1857 Act coming into force. Additionally, asserting that the Act “allowed married English women, for the first time, to separate from their husbands on the grounds of desertion or cruelty” (21), Yoon overstates its impact: even prior to the Act coming into force women did separate from their husbands and were able to seek a judicially sanctioned separation through an application to the ecclesiastical courts. All the 1857 Act did was to codify and simplify the procedure by which separation and divorce could be obtained. Given these misrepresentations, much of Yoon’s analysis of the impact of the 1857 Act cannot be relied upon.

Similarly, Yoon’s statements in relation to the impact of class are somewhat uneven. While she does place the suspicion with which Victorian readers viewed the detective as being a consequence of the character’s intrusion into “the domestic space of *middle-class* families” (3, emphasis added), some of Yoon’s more expansive comments relating to class are problematic. One such example is her assertion that the “widespread belief that working-class families were abusive inspired the parliamentary debates that led to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857” (28). Yoon relies on the work of Ben Griffin in support of this statement; however, Griffin’s discussion is not centered on the Matrimonial Causes Act, but on the parliamentary debates on the subject of domestic violence, particularly around the time of the enactment of the 1853 Criminal Procedure Act, which sought to better

prevent and punish aggravated assaults on women and children (Griffin 70–71). None of what Griffin states supports Yoon’s contention as to the rationale underlying the debate for change in relation to the law of separation and divorce, which was largely uninfluenced by any concern relating to the working classes, but was always seen as being driven by demand for the “cheapening of the law and the persistent attack by middle-class people on the privileges of aristocracy” (McGregor 17).

Additionally, there are some unfortunate errors dotted throughout the book, including Yoon’s statement that “in *Oliver Twist*, the titular character is born in wedlock despite his father’s wish to divorce his wife and marry Oliver Twist’s mother” (37n1), when it is clearly stated within the novel that Oliver Twist was born *out of* wedlock: an illegitimate child. This was the most egregious example of how this book would have benefitted from greater editorial oversight prior to publication.

Chapters 2 and 3 have a focus on the work of Dickens and the remainder of this review will be largely restricted to these two chapters, although it should be noted that the work of Dickens remains as a point of comparison to the work of later authors throughout the book, pointing to the pervasive influence of Dickens in the evolution of both the character of the detective and detective fiction in the Victorian era.

The overview in chapter 2 of articles relating to detectives written by Dickens for *Household Words* should be useful for Dickensians with an interest in this aspect of Dickens’s work, but there are some issues around Yoon’s analysis, not least of which is the misattribution of authorship of some of the articles. For example, she refers to Dickens comparing “detective work to scientific enquiry” in “The Modern Science of Thief-Taking” without seeming to realize that this article was not written by Dickens himself but by W. H. Wills (40). Similarly, she does not acknowledge that Wills was a joint author with Dickens on “The Metropolitan Detectives.” While one could argue that Dickens disseminated his views through the conduit of his periodical publication, and the words of his writers therefore represented the views of Dickens, Yoon should have been more careful about attributing words to Dickens. It should also be noted that the date of publication of the article “On Duty with Inspector Field” is incorrectly stated as 14 July 1851, when it was published in June of that year.

After noting that these detective stories and sketches were published between the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Bleak House*, and that these two novels therefore “reveal the trajectory of Dickens’s ideas about detectives” (42), Yoon moves on to a detailed discussion of the role of *Chuzzlewit*’s Mr. Nadgett as an early detective. She argues that Mr. Nadgett establishes a “link between knowledge and power” and that he “represents the fantasized possibilities of making sense of and not being drowned out by the excess of

information both in Dickens's novel and in nineteenth-century London" (44). In doing so, she begins to set out the narrative function of the detective within the novel, effectively presenting the detective as "unreadable," a less fully formed character within the novel who primarily serves to propel the plot forward by uncovering the history and motivations of other characters (46).

In chapter 3 Yoon turns to the detective as both villain and hero in *Bleak House*, with a joint consideration of Mr. Bucket and Mr. Tulkinghorn. Her assertion that there are two detective characters in this novel is based on the observation that "Mr Bucket's work picks up from where Mr Tulkinghorn's inquiries cease," their work being a "continuum of investigations into Lady Dedlock's past" (49). The exploration of the relationship between Mr. Bucket and Mr. Tulkinghorn is one of the stronger aspects of this chapter, as Yoon demonstrates how there is a merging of the narrative functions served by each of these characters. While Yoon adeptly sets out how the reader is more likely to respect Mr. Bucket while reviling Mr. Tulkinghorn, she does not reconcile Mr. Tulkinghorn's acknowledged "professionalism" with his "private interests ... as a lawyer" (54–55). Stating that "the lawyer is not bound to any code beyond his profession," Yoon does not set out the parameters of that code to explain Mr. Tulkinghorn's behavior or choices (56), even though the quote she incorporates from *Bleak House* reflects Dickens's own uncertainty as to the motivation underlying the actions of Mr. Tulkinghorn: the most he is willing to concede to the reader is that "[p]erhaps there is a rather increased sense of power upon him" (qtd. 56). Yoon also does not address the inherent contradiction in her assertion that Mr. Bucket serves "the social order and a collective cause, rather than the resolutely private interests that were pursued by Mr. Tulkinghorn," while at the same time acknowledging Mr. Bucket is employed by Mr. Tulkinghorn to obtain information regarding Lady Dedlock's past, with Mr. Bucket paid for his work (60).

In the course of her discussion of the relationship between the lawyer and the private detective, Yoon touches on some of the issues relating to the gendered aspects of the use of the detective in the novel, arguing that the detective emerges as "an independent masculine type in opposition to a seemingly depraved woman in sensation novels" (6). As her argument develops, she refers to the use of bigamy within the plots of such novels, positioning the bigamous wife as the female counterpart to the detective. Given that the detective plot has been acknowledged as one of the bigamy plot's "most significant co-plots" (McAleavey 17), it would have been useful if Yoon had tracked the rising popularity of the bigamy plot alongside that of the detective plot.

In the final chapter of the book, Yoon returns to Dickens with a brief

consideration of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. She points to the influence of Wilkie Collins on Dickens's later work, contrasting aspects of collaboration and rivalry between them, before turning her attention to "the opportunistic way" Dickens makes use of exoticism and Eastern characters, with the "prime suspect" an "Oriental outsider," pointing to the racializing aspects of the novel (138).

While Yoon's book offers a contribution to the broader scholarship around the detective in Victorian sensation fiction and the way in which the detective as a character was perceived by Victorian readerships, some of her statements should be treated with caution, given both the editorial issues within her study and difficulties around some of her assessment of the historical contexts.

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Melissa Rampelli. *Narratives of Women's Health and Hysteria in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. Pp. vii + 214. \$99.99. ISBN 978-3-031-39896-4 (e-book).

What do a Charles Dickens novel and the flu have in common? While this question might seem like the beginning of a joke, considering novels and illnesses through similar lenses can be informative. Melissa Rampelli does so in *Narratives of Women's Health and Hysteria in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, which presents detailed research into not just the history of hysteria before and during the nineteenth century, but also social, cultural, and medical conversations that informed and shaped that history. This research scaffolds Rampelli's close readings of five novels. Building on work by Janet Oppenheim, Kathryn Montgomery, D. A. Miller, and others, Rampelli employs what the author calls "the plot of pathology," in which diseases are approached as narratives (with acknowledgment that disease does not always take a simple linear trajectory to a conclusion) (5). If understandings of, and approaches to, hysteria reflect social and cultural contexts, then there also are intimate links connecting the sufferer, causes and cures, and those contexts. Thus, Rampelli states that through a narrative