

QUEER EMBODIMENT: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE VARI-ABLED IN THE FIRST ENGLISH NOVEL AND THE VICTORIAN ERA

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Victorian literature is the most popular era of literature studied by scholars, as it is the strongest in which to identify and analyze social changes that correlate with the Industrial Revolution and advancements in technologies. While scholarship is thorough, there is a gap within the intersection of two criticisms: disability studies and gender studies. It is important to understand and learn from issues of the past, especially thinking about the issues we struggle with in modern society. Disability theorists and scholars tend to focus heavily on the physical deformities of characters rather than cognitive or mental illness. Queer and feminist theorists, on the other hand, have looked into the portrayals of the mental illnesses of some characters in Victorian literature as it applies to gender stereotypes and queerness. In order to bridge this gap, I will be employing the theoretical lenses of disability and queer studies or queer-crip. Specifically, how the representations of mental illness and its intersection with gender and class have evolved from the first English novel, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), to the Victorian novel and its subgenre of the sensation novel in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). I will also demonstrate that mental illness is a variably abled or vari-abled embodiment to analyze its correlation with the intersectionality of queerness and gender within the representation of fictional characters. My contribution to this discourse will be to point out the similarities in their generalized fields regarding the representations of marginalized groups of people and combine them into a queer-crip examination of the intersectionality of identity.

Over the course of human history there has always been 'the other,' or the groups of people who do not conform to the rules and laws that society dictates. Within the early ages and creation of the novel genre, there have been many representations of such marginalized and disregarded members of society. *Pamela* was originally written as an instruction novel that was meant to teach readers and writers alike how such stories should be told and interpreted, as it was also the 'birth' of the novel. Within this novel there is a representation of a character that stands outside of society's definition of 'normal' and contributes to a scholarly discourse concerning the representations of embodiment and queerness. One such scholar, Mark

Jeffreys, describes the representation of disability as "not so much a pathological condition as it is a cultural condition, a marginalized group identity that has a history of oppression and exclusion, a stigmatized category created to serve the interests of the dominant ideology and its privileged classes" (32). As Jeffreys argues, disabilities and/or disparities regarding embodiment are a cultural construction rather than a pathological condition. According to Jeffreys and other disability theorists, society decides what is 'normal,' and anyone outside of that structure is considered to express this 'strange' or 'queer' embodiment. When applying this to queer theory and ideas about how such fictional characters are represented, there is a connection between this view of disability and other scholars' perspectives on disability studies, gender studies and queer theory, respectively. I believe Jeffreys' explanation of the cultural construction of embodiment begins to address the intersectionality of disability and queerness. Within *Pamela*, and throughout *Great Expectations* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, there are characters that share similar traits of masculinity in terms of power and strength within society and simultaneously represent physical and/or mental embodiments that fall outside of social norms. The juxtaposition of Mrs. Jewkes (*Pamela*), Lady Audley (*Lady Audley's Secret*), and Miss Havisham (*Great Expectations*) will be of their respective ailments and disruptions of societal bounds regarding gender roles in an effort to reveal their similarities as well as differences to analyze the discourse about mental or physical abilities and gender. Mrs. Jewkes, Lady Audley, and Miss Havisham are all representations of strong females who break societal dictations about gender roles but also present with 'symptoms' of a diverse embodiment.

Pamela is an epistolary novel published in 1740 and is considered one of the first novels. In correlation with this label and the influence of conduct literature on the genre, it exhibits factors that offer a fruitful constructivist analysis of intersectional identity and societal boundaries regarding marriage and gender. Mrs. Jewkes is an antagonist within her story, which prevents her from having a favorable description. However, the indulgence of those same negative qualities shows the reader just how Mrs. Jewkes's behavior is reflected within her descriptive characteristics, reiterating disability as a cultural construction: "The naughty woman

came up to me with an air of confidence and kissed me... and looked in such a manner as I never saw a woman look in my life” (Richardson 144). This is the precursor event that later shapes her visual appearance, and it represents a strict social boundary being disturbed and broken. Mrs. Jewkes is represented as a character that seems to indulge in masculine desires towards Pamela, exhibiting the same forcefulness and forthcoming attitude as Mr. B does in her previous letters. These interactions shape her recount of Jewkes’s appearance a few pages later. This example of masculinity within Jewkes and her queerness are being equated with disfigurement and demonization when she is immediately described as looking nothing like a woman. As Jason Farr establishes, “Mrs. Jewkes assumes a vigorous masculinity that provokes anxiety in Pamela,” that begins to shape her characteristics (74). In this instance, it was not Mrs. Jewkes’s appearance alone that presented this fearsome masculinity but rather her previous actions that influenced the characterization. The significance of this understanding is important to begin recognizing the intersectionality of these systems of queerness and embodiment.

Mrs. Jewkes is not just described as masculine and suffering from a disfigured embodiment; she is portrayed as developing or embracing this visual appearance after disrupting gender norms. As such, her queerness and masculinity can be equated with a disfigured embodiment. In Robert McRuer’s intersectional approach to disability studies and queer theory, he perceptively theorizes, “The system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness; that – in fact – compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa” (89). Mrs. Jewkes’s queerness and gender bending epitomize this statement, as she is depicted as a physically vari-abled person in order to reflect Pamela’s discomfort. Richardson, through Pamela, depicts Mrs. Jewkes as a character whose sexual preferences and ‘masculine’ strength impacts her outward appearance and ‘able-bodiedness’:

“Now I will give you a picture of the wretch! She is a broad, squat, pury, fat thing, quite ugly, if any thing human can be so called; about forty years old. She has a huge hand, and an arm as thick – I never saw such a thick arm in my life. Her nose is flat and crooked, and her brows grow down her eyes; a dead, spiteful, grey, goggling eye: and her face is flat and broad; and as to colour, looks as if It had been pickled a month in saltpetre. I dare say she drinks. She has a hoarse man-like voice, and is as

thick as she’s long; and yet looks so deadly strong, that I am afraid she would dash me at her foot in an instant, if I were to vex her. So that with a heart more ugly than her face, she is at times (especially when she is angry) perfectly frightful: and I shall be ruined, to be sure, if heaven protects me not; for she is very, very wicked.” (Richardson 152)

This paragraph describes the features and likeness of Mrs. Jewkes in Pamela’s eyes, but previous to this knowledge of her appearance, we are also shown her abrupt nature and ‘masculine’ attitudes when she kisses Pamela upon her capture. By villainizing her character, Richardson is demonizing queer individuals, as well as using features of vari-abled embodiment to portray a ‘wretched’ creature that exists outside of heteronormative and able-bodied society.

Richardson provides a certain amount of pathos to this character through the physical abnormalities. However, he is presenting a type of pathos that is not sympathetic, but rather creating a fear of this character, equating varied physical and cognitive embodiment with rejection and fear. As *Pamela* was one of the first novels ever written, it carried a lot of weight with subsequent writers attempting to enhance the genre. Within this novel are instructions not only on how it should be written, but how it should be read. In this sense, there is some severe injustice done to those people within society who have differing physical abilities, as this first novel presents such characters as a source of evil and someone of whom to be frightened. In short, this novel and its author set up an ableist discourse regarding vari-abled people that set society up for fear and the marginalization of such individuals. As Farr argues, “in establishing a correlation between foul heart and face, Pamela writes Mrs. Jewkes’s deformity into the narrative as a corporeal repository of that which is uncouth and compromising to young women’s virtue” (74). Within Pamela’s fearful description, she is correlating abnormal bodies to fear and lamentation for her loss of virtue. In other words, Mrs. Jewkes has fallen so far from virtue and honesty that her outward appearance changes and morphs into something physically abnormal, but this creates a discourse regarding physically unique individuals, suggesting that they are out of God’s favor and have fallen from virtue. This representation of Jewkes’s deviance from virtue in terms of her physical and cognitive embodiment and sexual identity combines to demonize and villainize her. This instance emblemizes the value of utilizing queer-crip theory in order to analyze Mrs. Jewkes.

As feminist scholars within rise of the novel stud-

ies have established, in the earliest creations of the novel genre, male writers were seen as adding to the social and political discourses while female writers' novels were seen as imitations of patriarchal work in literature and were considered illegitimate in terms of those discourses. This oppression and 'casting off' of female perspectives reminds me of one such feminist scholar, Sabine Volk-Birke, as she examines how the readers of the Victorian era viewed romances, "Romances provoked particular criticism. Their reading clashed with the training necessary to make a good wife. Romances encouraged extravagant ideas, because they softened the mind by love, and because readers fooled away so many days, even years, which they could use for a better purpose" (Volk-Birke 71). While Richardson's novel was a type of manual, it was presented under the guise of romance and marriage plots. Charlotte Lennox, a female author from the same period, created work that was a social commentary on the same issues of marriage and gender roles but was most likely critiqued and understood by the patriarchal society as nothing more than an 'imitation' of discourse that already existed, because in this patriarchal mindset, a woman should remain in the private sphere and not add to a discussion of politics and society. Despite these differences in Samuel Richardson's and Charlotte Lennox's novels and the reception of them as male and female writers, they both provide excellent commentaries on social discourse about queer embodiment in the twenty-first century. While Lennox's work may not have been as appreciated by the critics and social commentators of her time, she is certainly a voice that holds more power today as shown from works such as Volk-Brike. It is worth noting these differences between Lennox and Richardson in order to lay the groundwork for the gendered experiences of the Victorian novelists. Looking ahead to the Victorian era, these same disparities exist between Charles Dickens and Mary Elizabeth Braddon in their respective novels because of their gendered experiences as writers.

As time progressed, authors became more apt to disregard some of these earlier logistical establishments of what a novel should look like and how it should be read. Due to the influence of specific predecessors, such as Richardson, who provide an instructional manual for literature, it is no surprise that there are plenty of similarities that emerge in later works of fiction, such as that of Dickens and Braddon, as they not only appreciate and utilize some of those early instructions but deviate from them to administer change and growth into the novel genre. Besides initiating these advancements within a structural ideology regarding genre, Victo-

rian era society began to shape the ideologies of what we view as commonplace. These authors faced different struggles that influenced the way in which they viewed certain aspects of life and literature. For instance, there was an emergence of 'freak show' culture that received a certain amount of backlash from citizens who decided that people who suffer from physical ailments were not to be exploited for profit or spectacle; rather, they saw such individuals as deserving of sympathy (Mitchell). However, they did not think about the fact that such people could not integrate with 'normal' society and therefore were forced to live a life of seclusion and poverty. Jennifer Esmail and Christopher Keep coined the term "laughing at lunacy" and explored the history of how this notion came to be an acceptable pastime for Victorian Society. An exploration of this and how sympathy and pathos regarding vari-abled individuals evolved during this time period with the incorporation of intersecting aspects of identity will shape the remainder of my paper.

During the Victorian era there was a huge shift in ideologies regarding mental and physical vari-abled embodiments. The emerging ideology was one that correlated with freak show culture and the condemnation of it, while society simultaneously encouraged marginalization and mockery of the mentally ill or vari-abled cognitive embodiments. This has been historically analyzed by Simon Cross:

In the eighteenth century, the governors of London's Bethlem Hospital, popularly known as Bedlam, seized on a market opportunity allowing paying visitors to gawk at lunatics... Such a practice confirms our twenty-first-century sensibility that early modern attitudes to madness were unfeeling. But this raises a hermeneutical problem, which is how we are to interpret humour about madness and mad folk in a different historical period under different historical conditions. (Cross 2)

This example is how we begin to analyze 'madness' as disability. According to Cross, 'lunacy' became something to gawk at and something that was considered different and unacceptable. In other words, cognitive vari-abled embodiments generated a lack of sympathy while freak show culture was condemned at the same time. Society was gaining sympathy for physical ailments over cognitive ones. This shift in society's ideologies proves a cultural significance in the ways in which people are marginalized and how disabilities and intersecting identity markers of a person or character can create a new discourse. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder are two renowned disability scholars who initiated

discourses around disability theory and created the concept of “narrative prosthesis” as a way of analyzing disabled characters within literature. They have expertly explored through their scholarly work how “The interpretation of representations of disability strikes at the very core of cultural definitions and values” (Mitchell and Snyder 52). Mitchell and Snyder’s definition of disability recognizes the intersectionality of identity that causes these characters to exhibit such vari-abled embodiments. Authors’ representations of literary characters’ gender, sexual, and class identity originate from the values from their generation and culture.

Novelists are cultural agents that both represent and influence the gender, sexual, and class identities of their time and place. As a male author during the Victorian era, Dickens created the character of Miss Havisham that exhibits some aspects of a vari-abled mental embodiment. Not only is this character a woman but is a part of the upper-class. Miss Havisham is an “immensely rich and grim lady who lived in a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who lived a life of seclusion” (Dickens 87). Elaine Showalter, a renowned expert in feminist studies, explores the ways in which female mental illnesses are explored by critics and artists alike within the eighteenth century. She coined the term “female malady,” which relates to the cognitive and mental embodiments that seem to accompany women throughout historical literature and art. She explains “madness as one of the wrongs of woman; madness as the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality” (Showalter 3). This feminist viewpoint of how writers represent mental illness in women correlates to another definition of disability within literature imagined by Tabitha Sparks: “Disability has too often been problematically read as a straightforward metaphor for lack, the result of which has been a tendency to efface the material specifically of what it meant to live in society largely governed by ableist assumptions about which bodies matter and which do not” (Sparks). Within this explanation, there is a reiteration of fact that what it means to be ‘disabled’ is subjective and determined by the ruling classes of society. It is not a condition, but rather a social and cultural creation that is ‘governed’ by bourgeois ideology, which is patriarchal, ableist, and heteronormative. In terms of Miss Havisham, it is not what she lacks that evinces this definition, but what she holds over other individuals, such as her masculine traits, social standing, and wealth, along with her stereotypically feminine physique and disposition. Miss Havisham exhibits signs of mental illness and stress, and through this in correlation with her high social standing and clout within society, which

represents a position that is usually masculine, Dickens is equating her social class with mental illness or a vari-abled cognitive embodiment, because Miss Havisham is a woman that holds such a position in high society:

“I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly wax-work at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, wax-work and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could.” (Dickens 93)

Within this passage from the *Great Expectations*, Dickens alludes to the freak show culture mentioned earlier through his descriptive passages about Miss Havisham, as she exhibits the same qualities of “ghastly wax-work” as witnessed at a fair or carnival, which is where such shows would have been. Aside from the point Dickens seems to be exhibiting regarding freak show culture and Miss Havisham’s relation to it, he is also using misogynistic language to describe her state of being, with age and marital status as markers of worth. She is described as old and unmarriageable, which leads to the description of her skeleton and horrid waxwork like body, something unsightly in the eyes of a young man.

The role of love and romance within this novel, along with most novels of the era, is complex and depicted in an antifeminist manner. There was also an emergence of linking sexual desire in women with insanity and lunacy, as stated by historian Roy Porter: “Love madness became integral to the province of mad-doctors and the emergent psychiatric profession,” (216). Porter’s analysis shows that historically, insanity was a women’s issue, which created a gendered discourse around vari-abled mental embodiments. This correlation and sexist undertone of love and madness shows through in the characterization of Miss Havisham when she expresses her delusional thoughts on love: “I’ll tell you... what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust

and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter—as I did!” (Dickens 269). This speech is not only a definition of love in Miss Havisham’s eyes, but a confession of her jilted heart. She was driven insane by the lack of love she received and the way in which she lost her agency within society with age and marriageability, which were all women were valued for at this time. This kind of torture she brings upon herself is a result of earthly love becoming a perversion of godly love. Again, as Porter explains, expressions of “religious melancholy” were a mode of “love melancholy,” forming a casebook of the crazy self-inflicted torments mankind brought upon itself by its perversions of the love of God” (Porter 216). There was a sexist demonization of gender in this depiction of women’s love. Dickens embraces this idea through Havisham’s character as she screams “love her! Love her! Love her!” to Pip in an attempt to turn the young and beautiful Estella into a weapon that she can wield to break young men’s hearts as hers was once broken (Dickens 269). This creates an image of women so driven to madness by love and its religious perversions, portraying a whole gender as wicked.

Within Victorian literature there is a subgenre of the novel known as the sensation novel. In this genre, authors combine romance and realism with influences of melodrama and Gothicism to explore provocative themes and controversial societal issues. Sensation novels were usually written by women for women, the equivalent of a Lifetime movie in today’s popular culture. Dickens was a more traditional novelist, whereas Mary Elizabeth Braddon is considered the queen of the sensation novel, and she introduces some of the most idealistic and interesting characters in terms of femininity and class mobility. By initiating some discourse regarding femininity and class structure through her character of Lady Audley, Braddon is depicting some of the same traits that Porter examines within the perversion of godly love to earthly, and more specifically womanly love: “Woman, the emblem of love, became revealed as Lamia, the siren, femme fatale, temptress, tyrant, vampire, to love whom was a madness ending only in torment and destruction” (Porter 215). Lady Audley is illustrated as this dangerous womanly character that wielded the womanly weapons of love and destruction throughout her story, representing the epitome of Porter’s analysis. Even before the crimes she committed are brought to light, she is described in such a foreshadowing way that one can assume her wickedness:

Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic imparts a magic

harmony to her movement, a witchery to her every glance... Better the pretty influence of the teacups and saucers gracefully wielded in a woman’s hand, than all the inappropriate power snatched at the point of the pen from the unwilling sterner sex. (Braddon 242-243)

Braddon utilizes such imaginative figurative language in her descriptions of Lady Audley with terms such as “witchery” to describe her glances during her domestic duties of making tea. Something so trivial, domestic, and feminine is portrayed as something dark and magical as she “wields” the teacups as a type of magical weapon. These images are representative and a metaphor for the inappropriate power she holds over her husband, the baronet, and demonizes her gender in such a way that leads to her subjection to what Showalter has termed the “female malady.” We can utilize Lynn Voskuil’s analysis to understand the reasons why a feminist writer, such as Braddon, would shroud her message in such a cause-and-effect relationship:

“Braddon’s novel was threatening because, in the controversial figure of Lady Audley, the Victorian logics of authenticity were pushed to their conceptual and ideological extremes—thereby exposing the cruel paradoxes that authorized middle-class constructions of its own superiority... Alarmed reviewers spoke their minds in almost all the major and minor Victorian journals, focusing in many cases on Lady Audley as a character who had spuriously misplayed the natural roles of women.” (Voskuil 613-614)

The Victorian age was also one that produced an emergence of critics and reviewers for the novel, as readership, authorship, and production became more prevalent due to technological advancements, including the printing press. Due to these historical milestones with printing technology and an increase in readership due to factors such as education, public opinion influenced the plot of novels. Public unrest forced Braddon to adapt Lady Audley’s character to admit madness to appease the public who scrutinized her as a female novelist. Lady Audley’s crimes do not reflect insanity originating from love but rather an insanity emerging from a want of position and class status, which was very unusual and made her a character that endangered the minds of women, and this unfeminine desire was portrayed as madness.

Lady Audley’s Secret was written in the first person from the perspective of a male, Robert Audley, the nephew to Lady Audley’s husband, Sir Michael Audley. Robert plays the detective protagon-

onist who is torn by the concern of justice for the loss of his friend, George Talboys, and the happiness of his uncle. When Robert gains the courage to confront his aunt, Lady Audley, regarding the crimes he uncovered, he expresses his concerns:

“I do not say that Robert Audley was a coward, but I will admit that shiver of horror, something akin to fear, chilled him to the heart, as he remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since the day upon which Eve was created to be Adam’s companion and help-meet in the garden of Eden. What if this woman’s hellish power of dissimulation should be stronger than the truth, and crush him?... and remembering a hundred stories of womanly perfidy, shuddered as he thought how unequal the struggle might be between himself and his uncle’s wife.” (289-290)

Robert’s thoughts reveal the degree to which he is intimidated by Lady Audley’s fiendish, female nature. Her power lies in her deceptively fragile feminine appearance. He remains worried for his own protection and safety from her powers. Braddon is empowering women while also demonizing them. She is utilizing the male fear of “hellish” women and their original sin to express the feminist ideology of womanly strength under the guise of evil to placate critics. She is wielding a double-edged argument to project her feminist ideas while saving face with the patriarchal reviewers and society in general.

Within *Pamela*, and throughout *Great Expectations* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, I have placed a spotlight on characters that share similar traits of masculinity in terms of power and strength within society and simultaneously represent physical and/or mental embodiments that fall outside of social norms. This juxtaposition of Mrs. Jewkes, Miss Havisham, and Lady Audley has been of their respective ailments and disruptions of societal bounds regarding gender roles and while revealing their similarities and differences also provides a source in which to analyze the discourses surrounding mental or physical abilities and gender throughout the rise of the novel. Mrs. Jewkes, Lady Audley, and Miss Havisham are all representations of strong females who break societal dictations about gender roles but also present with ‘symptoms’ of a diverse embodiment. Reading their characters with a backdrop of intricately examined cause/effect relationships regrading queer and gender identity with variable physical and cognitive embodiments shows how these aspects of identity intersect and correlate with each other and the societal and class

structure of the Victorian era. I have located and discussed the gap I found within scholarly literature on the topics of disability, gender, and queer studies and utilized definitions and examples from them to explain that gap and attempt to bridge it using these female characters while also historicizing cultural events. Throughout my research I have utilized the female characters within this era of literature to explain the use of gender and queerness as demonizing and ‘othering’ because of their mental and physical vari-abled embodiments. However, to further the research and discourse on this topic it would be beneficial to look at the male characters of these same novels, as they too exhibit some characteristics of queer identity. For the future, researchers might also choose to look at Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* as a primary source as not only the characters within that novel exhibit similar characteristics, but the author himself identified as LGBTQ+. Understanding disability in correlation with queer and gender identity is significant when analyzing the rise of the novel in particular; the demonization of gendered and queer individuals was epitomized, solidified, and even liberated within these novels. With Richardson’s initial discourse surrounding Mrs. Jewkes, Dickens’ creation of the ‘love insanity’ from which Miss Havisham suffered, and veiled double-edged feminine argument made by Braddon regarding Lady Audley’s ‘fiendish’ femininity.

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