
Lisa SurrIDGE. *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*.
Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. 271p.

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In 1828 the Offenses Against the Person Act allowed cases of domestic abuse to be heard in Magistrates Courts, as opposed to being tried by a jury. The subsequent newspaper coverage of these trials began to reveal the cracks in domestic ideology, a fissure that was further widened over the following years by such legislation as the Matrimonial Causes Acts of 1857 and 1878, and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882. The debates preceding each Act and the trials resulting from them were fodder for court reporters, social critics, and commentators. The volume and nature of such suits challenged the underpinnings of Victorian gender conventions by calling into question the linkage of the domestic with the private, and such concepts as "protective manliness," in addition to revealing the tension between patriarchal authority and companionate marriage.

This period—from 1828 to 1904—and these issues are the background for *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*, Lisa SurrIDGE's study of Victorian fiction and domestic violence. In this volume, SurrIDGE engagingly argues that such domestic issues as coverture, domestic abuse, and divorce inform the novels and short stories of Charles Dickens, Anne Brontë, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope, Mona Caird, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Proceeding chronologically through the century, *Bleak Houses* explores the ways in which various legal or social issues are addressed in the fiction of these writers.

The cornerstone of SurrIDGE's argument is that the intense scrutiny of court and legislative proceedings and debates in newspapers and periodicals made flagrantly public what had previously been considered strictly private family matters, and that responses to this exposure become a central theme of Victorian fiction. Her study is extensively researched and informed by newspaper articles, court reports, magazine articles, and Parliamentary debates. With these texts as her ground, SurrIDGE shows how shifting cultural opinion about women's and men's roles in the family made its way into fiction.

SurrIDGE uses each chapter to focus on a particular aspect of public opinion and the law, beginning with her examination of Dickens' response to the 1828 Offenses Against the Person Act. Here SurrIDGE introduces one of the themes that will recur throughout her work, which is the law's increasing reach into the privacy of the middle-class home. Evaluating Dickens' work in this period, SurrIDGE notes that his "subjects may be working-class battered women, but his texts are thus laced with the growing middle-class concerns over the impact of public intrusion on the

private home” (18). In subsequent chapters she examines the question of domestic violence and middle-class manliness in *Dombey and Son*; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*’s criticism of “marital coverture as an underlying cause of domestic assault and abuse” (73); and the roles of community and redemption in Eliot’s short story “Janet’s Repentance” and Collins’ *The Woman in White*. Her exploration of *He Knew He Was Right* examines the tension between patriarchal authority and companionate marriage, and assesses the ways in which that novel “shows the newspaper as having a central role in the construction of ‘private’ consciousness” (186). Finally Surridge examines the “ideological upheaval” of the *fin de siècle* in Mona Caird’s feminist novel *The Wing of Azrael* and the late Sherlock Holmes stories.

Throughout the study Surridge keeps her lens focused on the questions each work raises about Victorian domesticity, marital abuse, and how these issues resonated in the public forum. Her style is cogent and engaging, and the text is illustrated with cartoons and drawings from periodicals and the novels themselves. Using trial transcripts and excerpts from Parliamentary debates, Surridge traces the manifestations of the cultural conversation in the novels, illuminating how the shift in public perceptions reveals itself in these fictive works. While none of Surridge’s conclusions are uniquely startling, her understanding of these particular texts as responses to Victorian concerns sheds light on that age’s shifting attitudes about gender and the family and illuminates the interconnectedness of fiction and the world that inspires it. *