

**MEDICINE AND FEMALE MONSTROSITY IN NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION:
BELINDA STARLING'S *THE JOURNAL OF DORA DAMAGE* (2007)**

Lea Heiberg Madsen
Universidad de Málaga
l.heiberg-madsen@uma.es

Victorian medical advances, along with Darwinian science, triggered an increasingly medicalised understanding of Human, which pervaded all spheres of 19th century culture and came to play a crucial role in the Victorians' perceptions of the body and mind. The medico-scientific differentiation between 'complete' and 'incomplete' subjects provided the backdrop for a wide range of pathological categories whereby to distinguish the deviants. This resulted particularly deleterious for women: medicine worked in tandem with the Victorian gender codes, and as the medical discourses on female corporeality became intertwined with Victorian popular culture, the notion of women's bodies as unstable, abnormal and monstrous was reinforced. Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) recalls how medical science both excited and relieved the Victorians' anxieties, and how medical and cultural intertextuality worked to impose social control over the outsiders. However, Starling skilfully subverts those discourses that pathologised and defined women's bodies as monstrous, and offers a re-presentation of the female figure. In addition, through its disruption of the Victorians' constructions of female monstrosity, the novel simultaneously questions the influence of today's medical-scientific discourses on popular perceptions of the woman and her body.

Keywords: Neo-Victorian fiction, female monstrosity, female corporeality, medicine, re-vision, Belinda Starling

All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine,
of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.
(Creed 1993: 1)

19th century medical advances and, not least, the rise of Darwinian science had a destabilizing effect on the Victorians' perception of the human subject (Hurley 1996). The emergence of criminal anthropology "foregrounded the necessity to read and write the criminal body as a set of visible stigmata ... and the separation of pathological from normal types, aligned ... pathology and deviance" (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 5). The increasingly medicalized understandings of Human proved particularly pertinent for women. The medico-scientific differentiation between so-called complete and incomplete subjects provided the backdrop for a wide range of "female maladies" (as Elaine Showalter has famously showed), and the medical discourses on female corporeality became intertwined with Victorian popular culture, reinforcing the notion of women's bodies as unstable, abnormal, and monstrous. Particularly the reproductive system was seen as in need of control, as "uncontrolled sexuality ... [was] the major, almost defining symptom of insanity in women" (Showalter 1987: 74) according to

Victorian psychiatry. In fact, as good as any “disorders of the female body were inextricably linked to the female reproductive system, so that female sexuality emerged as both casual and symptomatic of female abhumanness” (Hurley 1996: 120).

The medical, in many ways, translated into the cultural. “Representations of illness and disease in literature ... closely followed changes in medical discourses on the body” (Lupton 2003: 52) and, as Kelly Hurley has powerfully described, “the spread of abhumanness ... could be checked by the spread of science as it drew the lay population into its purview” (1996: 101). These tendencies clearly marked the Victorian Female Gothic, and in its reworking of traditional Gothic tropes, as Laurence Talairach-Vielmas has similarly suggested, it increasingly viewed obsession, villainy and monstrosity through a medical lens. Medicine, in other words, provided a tool for Gothic re-figurations, and earlier, more allegorical representations of, for example, female enclosure were replaced by real entrapments of women’s bodies either “within a medical discourse designed to institutionalize and enforce prescribed female roles” (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 139), or literally (and physically) within the medical institution as a place, such as the mental asylum.

The psycho-physiological “[m]odels of the (ab)human subject” (Hurley 1996: 20) worked in tandem with the Victorian divide between women as either angels or demons, consolidating the notion of female monstrosity: Woman whether represented in medical or ideological terms remained monstrous. The idea of female identity as, in this sense, doubly monstrous became internalized in the Victorians –in their culture and literature. However, the very circumstances that triggered a whole new generation of grotesque women and female monsters, simultaneously, “opened up a critical perspective on social and gender roles in the construction of the[se]” (Milbank, 2002: 155).

Female monstrosity has been explained in libratory terms. However, in the Victorian Female Gothic, monstrosity as a form for liberation is also, very often, deadly (Milbank 2002: 155). As Alison Milbank has observed, flight from or protest against patriarchal forces embraces both monstrosity and death: “a duality” which leaves the female monster “half in and half out of the grave” (2009: 93). Her liberation is, in effect, only partial. The Victorian Female Gothic, nevertheless, did challenge discursive and literal enclosure of the female figure, hereunder the construction of female monstrosity as a product of “the intertextuality of the medical and cultural scripts” (Mukherjee 2007: xi). Where it failed deconstruction or only partially liberated the female monster, subsequent re-vision, re-presentation and re-writing have attempted to compensate for this. That female monstrosity continues to “haunt the new feminist texts” (Becker 1999: 57), testifies, however, not only to the legacies of the Victorian in today’s feminine Gothic(s), but also to the fact that nineteenth-century constructions of female monstrosity and derivations thereof continue as part of our society and culture at present. As Susanne Becker observes: “postmodern gothicism recalls dynamics of the monstrous-feminine and explores their implications for the late-twentieth-century context –which does not seem that different, despite the sexual revolution” (1999: 60). In what follows I discuss how neo-Victorian fiction reworks the issue of female monstrosity, and reveals –through its simultaneous revision of past and present– the continuities of Victorian constructions of Woman in today’s (medical and lay) perceptions of the female body and mind.

The neo-Victorian novel is, in short, a “hybrid space” (Voigts-Virchow 2009: 112) which embraces not only the Victorians’ but also our own culture; a dialogic mode which enables revision on various levels. Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) reflects how medical science both excited and relieved the Victorians’

anxieties, and how medical and cultural intertextuality worked as a tactic to impose social control over the deviants. Clearly, Starling interweaves the discourses in order to reverse Victorian power positions and expose the contradictions of a society in which medicine “define[d] and secure[d] gender identity” (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 15). The novel, in other words, reworks nineteenth-century medicine: first, it re-constructs the self-same discourse that pathologised women and defined their bodies as monstrous; then, subverts it, offering a re-presentation of the female figure. In contesting the Victorians’ constructions of female monstrosity, however, the novel simultaneously questions the influence of today’s medical-scientific discourses on popular perceptions of the woman and her body.

Set in the mid-19th century London, the novel tells the story about Dora Damage, wife of a bookbinder who, as a result of severe illness, leaves both his business and family in huge debt. In order to save her family from complete ruin, Dora must draw on untraditional means: she takes over the bindery and manages to keep the business going. The protagonist’s stepping out of the socio-cultural conventions is the beginning of a journey that takes her to a Victorian underworld of erotic and scientific obsession. She starts binding books for ‘Les Sauvages Nobles’, a so-called Scientific Society where gentlemen meet to celebrate their shared interest in anatomic science and exotic discoveries (meaning: erotic and pornographic literature), and soon, Dora finds herself caught in a web of vice, abuse and deceit.

Medical science is a key element in the novel, principally and literally embodied in the character Jocelyn Knightley: London’s “most eminent, radical and life-changing, nay, *epoch*-changing, physician of his generation” (Starling 2007: 236, original emphasis), who also comes to reflect the ambiguous status of nineteenth-century medicine as both an element of salvation and fear. Knightley successfully relieves both Dora’s husband’s sufferings and daughter’s epileptic fits through bromide treatments and opium draughts. However, although medicine, in this sense, has a certain positive function, medical science remains a constant threat to Dora. In fact, it is the power of the medical institution, the physicians and specialists with their cures and remedies, rather than disease itself that terrify Dora the most. Recalling her daughter’s first epileptic fits as a newborn, she reflects:

I ... called for the doctor ... who told me she was having a teething fit, and gave her castor-oil, and told me to submerge her up to the neck in hot water the next time she fittid ... I did not call the doctor again, for there was a fear greater than that from which I knew my daughter was suffering. I had grown to understand that my daughter was afflicted by the same disorder that ruined my grandfather’s chances of a reasonable existence, and which saw him incarcerated in an asylum at the age of twenty-four. (10)

Dora’s words portray ironically nineteenth-century medical advance and reflect, as previously suggested, how medicine played a double role in the Victorians’ lives.

As others have observed, the trope of “epilepsy was to be found in many a Gothic narrative, especially at the end of the nineteenth century” (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 100). In *The Journal of Dora Damage*, Starling offers a re-presentation of the epileptic who in the Victorian era tended to be depicted as either a demonic creature or medical patient, “cursed in both cases by the disease (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 100). Starling shows, in effect, that there is nothing demonic about sweet, five-year-old Lucinda. Demonic rather describes Diprose and Knightley who take advantage of the girl’s condition and turn it into a means for control and abuse: threatening her mother with “carry[ing] out ... a *cli-tor-i-dec-to-my*” (237, original emphasis) on Lucinda, if

Dora causes them any trouble. The men, moreover, can assure Dora that “the police will be convinced of the necessity of the operation, when they discover her mother’s fascination with sordid texts and will make the appropriate equation that heightened sexuality must be an inheritable trait” (238). Medicine, in short, provides the villains with an extremely powerful weapon.

In *The Journal of Dora Damage*, medicine is deadly and doctors are twofaced. The novel, however, ultimately disrupts the Gothic stereotype of the powerful (male) doctor and his helpless (female) patient-victim, when Dora, in the end, literally takes control and turns the traditional power dynamics upside down. Consequently, as Marie-Luise Kohlke has observed, “[Dora] becomes both a skilful manipulator of, and profiteer from, the very gender, class, and race based injustices of Victorian society she abhors” (2008: 197). Starling revises and reverses thus the mechanisms of the 19th century medical which objectified and controlled women, “particularly by way of the pathologisation of their bodies” (Davison 2009: 206). As I have suggested above, the novel, at the same time, reveals an underlying preoccupation with, and questioning of, twenty-first-century female corporality and the persisting cultural (and medical) constructions of woman as flawed, deviant and monstrous.

Dora and Pansy obviously contradict Victorian ideals of femininity, but they also challenge today’s popular notions of what is womanly. Dora’s physical appearance, which is “not so much thin as muscular, all sinewy arms and bony shoulders, with no breasts or hips to speak of” (15), places her far away from both Victorian and twenty-first-century female body ideals. Moreover, Dora’s own reflection on her unwomanly muscles, “snub nose”, “lank hair” and her chin which sticks out “like a bun” (15), could easily be reproduced in a modern context. Indeed, an increasing number of women nowadays have plastic surgery done to make up for similar ‘flaws’ and ‘lack of femininity’. In addition, the heroine’s “inept housekeeping”, as Kohlke has pointed out, “resonates strongly with the stressful pace and conflicting demands of the lives of today’s professional women, expected to consummately multitask and balance often irreconcilable demands of career and family” (2008: 201, my emphasis). Pansy is another example of how Starling plays around with notions of womanhood, femininity and deviance. Despite being a fallen woman, or as Dora puts it: “hav[ing] ‘whore’ written all over her” (246), the young woman turns out an excellent housekeeper and maternal figure.

Through the character of Sylvia Knightley, the novel recalls the Victorian pathologisation of women’s reproductive function. Sylvia, “blessed to be married to the finest physician in London” (206), is accordingly confined during her pregnancy. As the novel recalls, “the urge not to excite women during gestation or after delivery during lactation –that is, when the female body most exhibited its flows– was linked to fears that misdirection of such fluids (blood or milk) might produce hysteria” (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 115). Sylvia has moreover been ‘adequately bound’ and is unable to produce any milk when she arrives at Dora’s with her starving and screaming newborn son.

The construction of the pregnant/lactating woman as pathological is, however, systematically deconstructed. In fact, the notion of the female body as “ruled by circulating fluids” (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 115) is, eventually, thoroughly subverted through the figure of Mrs Masters. The wet nurse proves how breast milk is indeed controllable and life-giving, and tells Sylvia how to get it started –a common piece of advice which remains valid:

rub them ... pinch them, brush them ... [g]ive them to the baby to suck ... let him suck and suck even if he's a hungry bugger, and if he screams cos he ain't getting nothing, then pull him off, and feed him with a teaspoon ... then put him back on (323).

Mrs. Masters, whose instructions remain highly valid, works as a significant parallel to today's midwife. Indeed, Masters's enthusiasm about breastfeeding, praising breast milk as the best substance on earth, can be read not only as a subversion of the Victorian construction of the unruly and monstrous female fluid, but also as a comment on persisting (or re-emerging) negative perceptions of, and barriers to, lactation that exist in our society at present.¹ In this sense, the whole scene with the wet nurse comes to resonate with recent debates around breastfeeding, revealing Starling's "implicit engagement with present-day issues" (Kohlke 2008: 200).

To conclude, "the neo-Victorian novel ... animate[s] the past, but ... can only do so from the perspective of the present, which will always read it as reflective of its own preoccupations" (Gamble 2009: 127). In effect, *The Journal of Dora Damage* offers a re-vision of Victorian medicine and its role in the socio-cultural understanding and regulation of the female body, while simultaneously opening up for a broader discussion of woman and the persisting influence of the medical discourse in the classification, definition and perception of our bodies. As critics have argued, "the size of our hips and thighs [continues to be] seen as a medical concern; breasts are described as atrophied after a woman stops breastfeeding; and healthy female skin is described as cellulitis ... [p]lastic surgeons talk about the 'deformities' of aging" (Arroba 2003: 1-2). Starling's first and only novel thus comes to exemplify neo-Victorian revision: "a fascinating area of tension between the Victorian and the contemporary" (Voigts-Virchow 2009: 112).

Notes

1. Recently, a number of Danish leisure establishments prohibited breastfeeding (based on the argument that such 'a repulsive affair' should be kept within the home's four walls). This triggered, not unexpectedly, fervent protests against such attempts at female confinement in the 21st century. However, the debate around breastfeeding in public has also revealed a significant number of spokes-men and women in favour of illegalising it.

Works Cited

- Arroba, Anna 2003: "The Medicalization of Women's Bodies in the Era of Globalization". *Women's Health Journal*. [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The Medicalization of women's bodies in the era of globalization.-a0109580693](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Medicalization+of+women's+bodies+in+the+era+of+globalization.-a0109580693)
- Becker, Susanne 1999: *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Creed, Barbara 1993: *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Davison, Carol Margaret 2009: "Monstrous Regiments of Women and Brides of Frankenstein: Gendered Body Politics in Scottish Female Gothic Fiction". Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, eds. *The Female Gothic. New Directions*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. 196-214.
- Gamble, Sarah 2009: "You Cannot Impersonate What You Are': Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel". *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 20.1-2: 126-40.

- Hurley, Kelly 1996: *The Gothic Body. Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the fin-de-siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise Autumn 2008: "De Corporis et Libri Fabrica: Review of Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage*". *Neo-Victorian Studies*. http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past_issues/Autumn2008/NVS%201-1%20M-Kohlke%20Review-B-Starling.pdf
- Lupton, Deborah 1994: *Medicine as Culture. Illness, Disease and the Body in Western Societies*. London: SAGE.
- Milbank, Alison 2002: "The Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830-1880". Jerrold E. Hogle, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 145-65.
- Mukherjee, Ankhi 2007: *Aesthetic Hysteria. The Great Neurosis in Victorian Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Showalter, Elaine 1987 [1985]: *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*. London: Virago.
- Starling, Belinda 2007: *The Journal of Dora Damage*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Talairach-Vielmas, Laurence 2009: *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Voigts-Virchow, Eckart 2009: "In-yer-Victorian-face: A Subcultural Hermeneutics of Neo-Victorianism". *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 20.1-2: 108-23.



THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org