

Excessive Reference: "Proximity" and Personality in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction

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In 1863, Henry Longueville Mansel published a now notorious article widely cited as a denunciation of sensation fiction ("Sensation Novels," *Quarterly Review*, 113, (April 1863), 481-514). Its fundamental argument depends on a notion of excess: not only is the intended reader's corporeal reaction - "excitement" - that sensation fiction generates is excessive - "morbid" - but the number of texts generated is excessive too. While the intention of the article was certainly to excoriate the sensation novel through its denunciation of excess, it also offers us an illuminating methodology through which to read not only what it condemns but a good deal of nineteenth-century fiction.

This paper will limit itself to thinking through the implications of two elements of Mansel's analysis: what he calls "proximity" and "personality." To test the limits of these methods of reading I shall use them to read a well-known, if today little read, nineteenth-century sensation novel, Mary Braddon's 1864 triple decker *Henry Dunbar: the Story of an Outcast* which describes the rise and fall of a disgraced bank clerk who murders and impersonates a wealthy banker. It was, apparently, the novel that made Braddon the most money, though it was not the novel that sold the most - that remains *Lady Audley's Secret* of course. There is actually little work on *Henry Dunbar*, which is a pity as it is a very rich text that teaches very well. There is a fine edition by Ann-Marie Beller for Victorian Secrets and Saverio Tomaiuolo has written an illuminating if, alas, brief comparison of it with *Lady Audley's Secret* in his interesting volume on Braddon's lesser known work, *In Lady Audley's Shadow*. Saverio focusses on the variety of detectives and detective narratives, including the decision by the hero to keep the story of his wife's history "hidden in [the family's] hearts - a dark chapter in the criminal romance of life, never to be revealed upon earth" p. 92.

My tack here is very different from Saverio's. My question is rather, to what extent was the reader led to make connections with contemporary news stories, reading them in terms of "personality" or "proximity," either specifically or generally? The answer will define the "excess of reference" that, I shall argue, much Victorian sensation and crime fiction depends on.

For Mansel, "proximity" is the quality of a story that makes it seem familiar to us - a kind of story that asks us to read not only the text suspiciously but also to read the people around us suspiciously. "Personality," on the other hand, suggests a way of understanding the text as a *roman à clef*, a text that only needs a key to open it up to our understanding. The difference between the two is not always clear: certainly when academics study a text historically we don't find it always helpful to split the two. Two examples will show what I mean.

First, let's turn to a theme of *Henry Dunbar* which was also topical: identity fraud. This is actually quite hard to trace in the Victorian press, as a variety of terms was used, as the most cursory search on the British Newspaper Archive will demonstrate. However, relevant to *Henry Dunbar* the "forgery of signatures" is an easy enough term to find. The first of the following will certainly resonate with those of us familiar with the Braddon novel.

- "Forgery by a Youth at Dewsbury" *Bradford Observer*, May 31, 1869, p.3
- "Extensive Forgery by a Clerk" *Liverpool Mercury*, April 30, 1860 p. 8
- "Enormous Forgeries on a London Firm by a Liverpool Tea Dealer" *Morning Post*, December 4, 1860, p.5

Such cases are all over the press. “This is certainly the age of fraud” as the “Leader” *Morning Post*, December 19, 1864, p.4 declared. The same piece also reported a case of “impersonation” - which in this case concerned fake goods – a recurrent problem in the commercial world. Then as now, it would only damage trade if someone were producing cheap goods and selling them under the name of a luxury brand.

None of these provides a key to *Henry Dunbar* however – they aren’t in that sense “personalities” underlying the text. They are just a set of stories that circulated at the time, providing discursive legitimacy for Braddon’s story of identity fraud, making it sound topical and relevant to readers’ lives. I think we can read such articles as guarantors of the novel’s “realism”

Another and more extended example will test the limits between proximity and personality even more. We’ll start with something clearly proximate. Ann-Marie Beller, in her excellent introduction to her edition of *Henry Dunbar*, points out how the novel engages with debates around the death penalty at the time – the novel asks us to consider whether Joseph Wilmot deserves the death penalty for the murder of a man who did him wrong. It’s a question that places justice in conflict with the law – the law says he must be hanged but the way Mary Braddon presents him may lead us to conclude that he’s suffering enough already, and that perhaps it’s only for God to decide ultimately how worthy someone is, how guilty and how good, and how just their punishment. The novel focusses this general conflict on the question of the death penalty. But why? How topical was this in the 1860s? As Ann-Marie points out, there were in fact repeated debates about the death penalty in Parliament in the 20 odd years that preceded the publication of *Henry Dunbar*. More salient than just looking at the frequency of debates in Parliament though is a graph that’s easy to make through the online Gale-Cengage resource *Artemis*. I searched for the term “death penalty” and considered how often the term appeared in the press across the nineteenth century. I wanted to investigate just how topical discussion of the death penalty was when Mary Braddon’s novel came out. The term in fact appeared in newspapers and periodicals with greater frequency in the mid 1840s and a great deal more in the late 1870s and early 1880s and then again in the 1890s. It was not such a burning issue in the 1860s. It does not at first seem that the novel was engaging in topical debates therefore. But more important for our purposes than the overall number of times a term appears is the curve of its rise and fall. When Mary Braddon was writing *Henry Dunbar* the number of times the death penalty was mentioned in the press was going up. At the time of course Braddon couldn’t know quite how burning an issue it would become (or not) – only that there was increasing interest in the topic by the press. It won’t surprise you to hear that in choosing this topic as central to the novel, I think Braddon knew exactly what she was doing: her profits are a result of *speculation* on the rising topicality of the debate: she wasn’t capitalising on an already achieved topicality.

But there was a much more precise and specific example debating the appropriacy of the death penalty for a murder. Of all the sensational cases involving the death penalty that were reported in the press at the time – and there were a lot - perhaps the most relevant in the years immediately preceding *Henry Dunbar* and its previous serialisation as *The Outcasts* over 1863-4, was “The Glasgow Murder”. The case is now better known as the Sandyford Murder, as the killing took place at the very respectable address of 17 Sandyford Place, Glasgow in 1862. A servant by the name of Jessie McPherson was brutally butchered with a meat cleaver wielded by someone who wasn’t very strong in the house of a Glasgow accountant John Fleming who was absent at the time – his 87 year old father James Fleming was, however, in the house at the time of the murder along with the murdered woman’s servant friend, Jean McLachlan – confusingly also known as Jessie. This latter Jessie was accused of having committed the murder and was sentenced to death. The evidence was by no means conclusive, however, even if the investigation used the latest technology - forensic

photography -- and it was the first case handled by the newly formed detective branch of the Scottish police. The case was reported in immense detail in the press: for example, almost 4 entire columns were devoted to it in the *Morning Post* of 23 September 1862 and the *Irish Penny Dispatch* of 27 September; the *Dundee Advertiser* found the story so popular that it chose to omit other news in order to cover it fully.

One of the reasons for the extensive reportage of the case was the ambiguity of the evidence and whether Jessie McLachlan therefore deserved to die. For the evidence was also strong for the murder having been carried out by James Fleming, the wealthy and aged father of the householder. Jessie McLachlan claimed in the end that James had committed the murder after she, her murdered friend Jessie and he had been drinking in the kitchen, and the two Jessies had refused the old man's sexual advances. The surviving Jessie said that James had told her they had to cover up the murder or they'd all get into trouble. There was a huge public outcry in the woman's favour and eventually her death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and deportation to Australia.

I shan't go into the gory details that the press freely detailed. What's of much more interest is the public reaction. The whole country was involved. There were protest meetings and petitions, and the press too was, on the whole, on the side of Jessie McLachlan. It seemed, however, that the law was on the side of the wealthy man and not on the side of the servant woman. Some papers were carefully ambiguous. The *Era*, an up-market London-based paper more interested in the theatre than general news, felt it had to say that the accused woman "did not deserve sympathy". Did that mean that it was possible that she did - why mention otherwise? And then we see how the sentence seems to oppose sympathy with the law, stressing that its support for the review of her sentence not on the grounds of sympathy but on the grounds of law.

Later, after Jessie's sentence had been transmuted to transportation, we find petitions such one in the *Morning Advertiser* which reprints from the *Glasgow Herald* a fundraiser to help Jessie McLachlan's sisters. It seems that a lady had met one of Jessie's sisters who was also a servant and found that she had been dismissed from her post because of her sister's perceived guilt. Yet, ask the papers, why should the sins of one family member be visited on another? This is exactly the issue the murderer's daughter Margaret has to face in *Henry Dunbar*. And then it's clear that some really do feel sympathy for Jessie McLachlan - for here the lady asks that that sympathy be extended to Jessie's sisters - exactly as the novel asks us to extend our sympathy to Margaret and indeed to the murderer himself.

Justice here appears on the side of sympathy, opposed to the law, and it is this discursive opposition through which we *Henry Dunbar* begs to be read. The deepest level of the proximity of *Henry Dunbar* indeed lies in how the discourse of the law is interrogated by the discourse of justice - and vice versa. That is a common enough opposition in detective fiction but what's particular in the nineteenth century is the importance of religion for the concept of justice. *Henry Dunbar* asks how far we are willing to sympathise with its title character. Is he going to go to heaven? Our answer will tell us more about whose side you we are on than about the reality - for of course we can't really know. The murderer's daughter Margaret says she believes God will be merciful, that her father was repentant and so he will go to heaven - but if we read her suspiciously, as we should in reading detective fiction, we'll understand that she is compelled to say that as having a repentant reprobate for a father makes her more marriageable if she than if she has a unrepentant one.

Now I hope it's obvious that I'm not suggesting for a moment that a secret meaning of *Henry Dunbar* can be opened by referring it to the Glasgow Murder or to any of the fraud cases. Yes, the confusing use of the same name by Jessie McPherson and Jessie or Jean McLachlan links the murder to the

confusion of names and identities in *Henry Dunbar*, and the question of the latter Jessie's guilt and whether she deserved the death penalty can be linked to a reading of *Henry Dunbar* sympathetically in terms of divine justice, but really only in a very general way and, crucially, by a specific set of readers. Our students today do not have knowledge of the Sandyford case unless they are taught it: they do not realise that the same discourses of justice and the law surround both the Sandyford case and *Henry Dunbar*. To make those connections implies being part of a reading community which reads both newspapers and novels and freely makes connections between them at a specific time and place. These discourses circulate, drawing people together into communities – manifested most clearly in the group demonstrations demanding justice for Jessie McLachlan. But *Henry Dunbar* doesn't demand a reading solely in terms of precise "personalities" to require understanding. It requires no key available to any specific group. Is, I wonder, teaching such a key – teaching such topicality – excessive for our students? It exceeds the bounds of their knowledge of course but what is the advantage to them of knowing it?

If there is a key to *Henry Dunbar*, the Mansel attack on sensation fiction seems as good as any. It doesn't give us *a meaning*, but it gives us *procedures* – how reading is conducted, not what meaning is. Mansel suggested, as I reminded you at the beginning, that sensation novels offers us bodily experiences of various sorts – the shocks and jolts of what were called "strong" situations, surprise twists in the tale, and, to revisit that notion through twentieth-century critics influenced by psychoanalysis, the raising of mild anxiety to ward off greater anxieties. But here the pay off that perhaps answers my previous question of the value of teaching references otherwise closed off from our students, is another bodily sensation that might seem more mental than physical and yet which combines the body and mind inseparably - that is, that sensation novels, like detective fiction in general, offers us the pleasurable fiction that we can know everything and make the chaotic world we live in cohere in a logical or at least comprehensible manner. By reading in a proximate way just like by hunting for the personalities hidden under the text, by reading a text across other texts contemporary to it, we are seeking to track down meaning, to pin down a mystery – and when we do, when we make connections between the text and the archive we use to interpret it, when we discover such connections, we feel a thrill run through our limbs, a pleasurable shiver down our spines. It is an exorbitant pleasure. This is the sensation of an excess of meaning that rewards us in a manner that seems to outweigh the money we have paid for it. Indeed it seems to cancel and make us forget the commercial transactions which enabled our pleasure in the first place – for even if we read online a free downloaded version from say archive.org, we will have had to buy the phone, tablet or laptop to read it on as well as the internet connection. Of course the pleasure is illusory, a fiction like the fiction we are reading - and to whose benefit is our pleasure? Ours alone? The practice of solitary reading today might suggest that.

Such pleasure is part of the game that not just the author but the whole publishing system plays with us and which we participate in willingly. We are flattered by being offered solutions to problems when we think we've solved the problems ourselves. This flattery is an added pleasure for us, a pleasure we feel as a thrill when we make those unexpected connections. This shiver of recognition is not entirely ours – it's manufactured by the publishers and authors, it's a plant, a feint, a promise of another reality, a coherent, logical one that masks the payment the publishers and authors have taken from us. It's a pleasure also, as I've written elsewhere, that gratifies us as academics because it shows us we are part of the academic system and contribute to it. As you'll be aware if you've read Derrida's "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression", the goal for those of us who root around in the archive is, according to Derrida, to find the previously secret. This is indeed codified in the UK Research Excellence Framework under the criterion of "originality" whose importance is drummed into us from the beginning of our academic careers. But the pleasure I am

describing is in excess of any satisfaction we might have in obediently following our orders. When we create what the common metaphor regards as a hitherto hidden meaning - a secret meaning – we are doing far more. For what that secret comprises is inextricably bound up with the idea of the unique thing and the unique event - with a magical, mystical moment of enlightenment – the *authentic* instant where we neither know nor care if we are the researcher or the researched, the ghost or the haunted, writer or written. We search for evidence where “the trace no longer distinguishes itself from its substrate,” – everything dissolves thrillingly into a feeling of oneness. We seem to touch a “vanish’d hand” and hear “the sound of a voice that is still”. In other words, we search the archive not really for knowledge of the secret but *a feeling, an experience – a sensation*. This surely is the Excessive Reference, the “morbid excitement” of sensation fiction that Mansel denounced, and which we seek out and when we find it, embrace.