



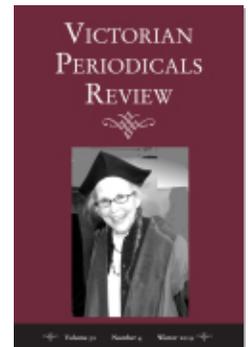
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The Plot Thickens: Illustrated Victorian Serial Fiction from Dickens to Du Maurier by Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge (review)

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Victorian Periodicals Review, Volume 52, Number 4, Winter 2019, pp. 806-808
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vpr.2019.0060>



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BOOK REVIEWS

Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa SurrIDGE, *The Plot Thickens: Illustrated Victorian Serial Fiction from Dickens to Du Maurier* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), pp. v + 331, \$85.00 hardcover.

The Plot Thickens: Illustrated Victorian Serial Fiction from Dickens to Du Maurier, by Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa SurrIDGE, provides illuminating new answers to a foundational question for Victorian periodical studies: “How does the form of the illustrated Victorian serial novel invite readers to read?” (2). Drawing upon an impressive range of archival research and invoking an eclectic set of case studies that range from canonical works such as *David Copperfield* (May 1849–November 1850) and *The Small House at Allington* (September 1862–April 1864) to lesser-examined works such as *The Tower of London* (January–December 1840), *Griffith Gaunt* (December 1865–November 1866), and *Peter Ibbetson* (June–December 1891), Leighton and SurrIDGE convincingly argue that images and letterpress in Victorian serial fiction most often function as co-equal modes of representation that “impel reflective and complex reading strategies” (50). Anchoring their analysis in narratology, the theory of how fiction is narrated, Leighton and SurrIDGE demonstrate that illustration does more than simply picture a novel’s text; instead, images add complexity and “thicken” serial plots by infusing Victorian novels with a second source of narrative influence (19).

Interdisciplinarity is at the heart of *The Plot Thickens*, and this is reflected in an astute methodology that embraces historical, materialist, and formalist approaches to the illustrated Victorian serial. The introductory chapter, “Material Matters,” provides a detailed history of the developing technologies of book illustration (from steel etchings and engravings

to wood engravings to photomechanical reproduction); an overview of the Victorian literary marketplace informed by the work of Robert L. Patten, Brian Maidment, Julia Thomas, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, Catherine Golden, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, and others; and a new theoretical lens for reading serial illustration. The innovative application of narratology to images as well as letterpress is a significant contribution to the field of periodical studies because it provides a precise vocabulary for describing verbal-visual relationships. As Leighton and SurrIDGE point out, “Narratological terms—such as *prolepsis*, *analepsis*, *mimesis*, *diegesis*, *iteration*, *repetition*, and *extradiegesis*—can help us to identify and understand these complex relationships between visual and verbal plots” (20). The remaining chapters of the book, grouped by genre, apply narratological analysis to representative texts from the birth of the format in the 1830s through the waning of the serial novel during the fin de siècle.

The first chapter focuses on the genre of autobiography through two case studies: Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, illustrated by Hablot K. Browne, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cousin Phyllis* (November 1863–February 1864), illustrated by George Du Maurier. Analyzing the representation of reading and the presence of word pictures within these illustrated serials, Leighton and SurrIDGE argue that “the technology of the illustrated book became a potent metaphor for inner life, memory, and self making” (53). Historical serial fiction is the focus of chapter two, which examines *The Tower of London* by William Harrison Ainsworth with illustrations by George Cruikshank, William Makepeace Thackeray’s self-illustrated *Vanity Fair* (January 1847–July 1848), and Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Looking specifically at the two dominant modes of visual historical representation—metaphorical and metonymic—the authors argue that the illustrations in each example interact with the letterpress to produce a distinctive theorization of historical change. *The Tower of London* uses metonymic wood engravings, for example, to inspire readers to preserve national monuments. *Vanity Fair*, on the other hand, “deploys verbal and visual sign systems to play ironically with both imagined scenes and metonymic representations of the past” (95). Even two different illustrated versions of the same novel, in the case of *A Tale of Two Cities*, provide contrasting visions of history. The American version in *Harper’s Weekly* (May 7–December 3, 1859), illustrated by John McLenan, uses “matching mimesis” to create for readers “an illusion of immediacy and immersion in history” (95). In contrast, the English monthly part-issue version published by Chapman and Hall, featuring proleptic illustrations by Browne, focuses readers’ attention on “modes of representation and interpretation itself as central to the project of making history” (95).

Leighton and SurrIDGE next turn to the role of illustration in realist and sensation novels. In the third chapter, the authors consider illustration

in three realist novels: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (August 1864–January 1866), illustrated by Du Maurier; Dinah Mulock Craik's *Mistress and Maid* (January–December 1862), illustrated by John Everett Millais; and Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington*, also illustrated by Millais. In these novels, Leighton and SurrIDGE argue, multimedia verbal-visual modes of representation convey everyday life's ordinariness and yet amplify it with extraordinary significance: "Subjected to scrupulous attention by both visual and verbal artists, . . . the ordinary became extraordinary—accorded significance, reverence, and even irony but always seen as meriting the highest form of aesthetic engagement" (157). Chapter four takes up realism's opposite—sensation fiction—and argues that "visual illustrations were central to the sensation genre, increasing the shocking effects of the text and heightening the genre's emphasis on sexuality and the body" (207). Leighton and SurrIDGE reveal patterns of imagery associated with sensation, including swooning bodies, women on horseback, and freakish bodies, by analyzing Charles Warren Adams's *The Notting Hill Mystery* (November 1862–January 1863), illustrated by Du Maurier; Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt*, illustrated by William Small; and Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (September 26, 1874–March 13, 1875), illustrated by Henry Wood. The monograph closes with a final chapter on Du Maurier's self-illustrated fin de siècle novel *Peter Ibbetson*, a text that anticipates the transformation of the serial "into the future forms of cinema and virtual reality" (249).

Through their careful analysis of image and text in a wide variety of Victorian serial novels, Leighton and SurrIDGE discern an answer to their original question: "How does the form of the illustrated Victorian serial novel invite readers to read?" (2). This format, they conclude, results in a reading practice that is non-linear, self-conscious, and sophisticated. Pushing beyond simple constructions that posit illustration as primarily mimetic, *The Plot Thickens* uses narratological theory to make a strong case that Victorian serial fiction "offered its readers complex verbal-visual experiences, profound aesthetic pleasures, and a model of memory as a storehouse of treasured imagery carried throughout life" (277). This impressive study will undoubtedly shape the way Victorian studies scholars frame the topic of reading practices going forward, whether approaching it from the perspective of book history, art history, or literary studies.

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